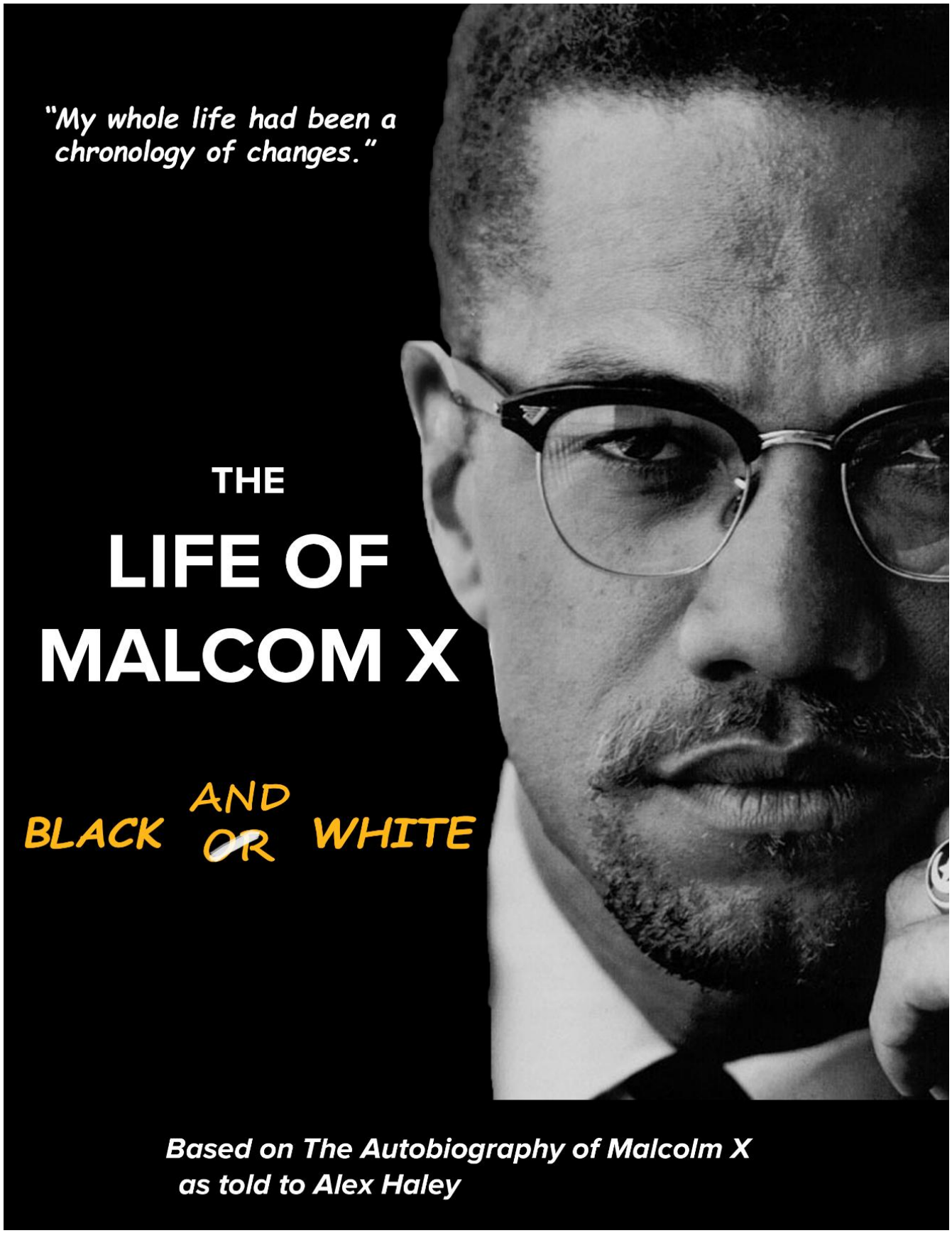
"My whole life had been a chronology of changes."
THE
LIFE OF
MALCOM X
BLACK AND OR WHITE
Based on The Autobiography of Malcolm X
as told to Alex Haley

# Copyright

# The Life of Malcolm X

## Black ~~OR~~ AND White

**Author:** *Samer AB*

This book was written with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools. All research, structure, and voice were directed by the author, and every line and page was crafted to meet the author's final judgment.

**Publisher:** *BiDAYA*

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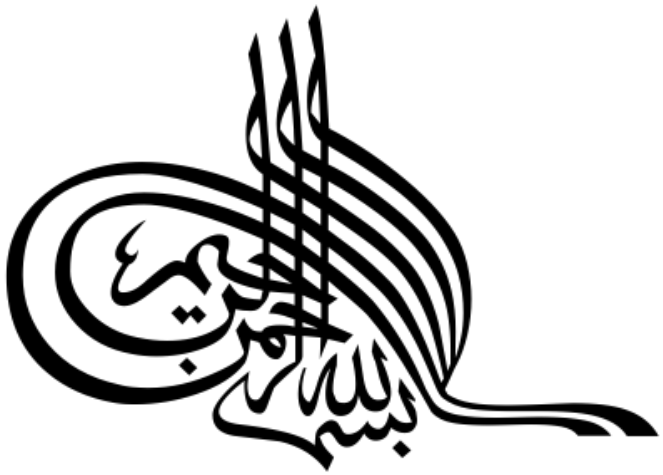
# Acknowledgement

This book is based on and entirely derived from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, as told to Alex Haley* (eBook ISBN 9781101967805). Malcolm's words throughout are quoted directly from that book, with page citations. All narration is original, reconstructed independently from the facts of his life as Haley recorded them.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# Forward

(In the Name of Allah—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful)

**Quran | (30) Surah Ar-Rum | The Romans** [1]

**20.** One of His ***signs*** is that He created you from dust, then—behold! —you are human beings spreading over the earth.

**21.** And one of His ***signs*** is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may find comfort in them. And He has placed between you compassion and mercy. Surely in this are signs for people who reflect.

**22.** And one of His ***signs*** is the ***creation*** of the ***heavens and the earth***, and the ***diversity of your languages and colors***. Surely in this are ***signs*** for those of ***sound knowledge***.

---

**Quran | (49) Surah Al-Hujurat | The Rooms**

**13.** O humanity! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female and made you into ***peoples and tribes*** so that you may ***get to know one another***. Surely the most noble of you in sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware.

---

**(Hadith)** Narrated by Abu-Hurayrah, the Prophet (ﷺ)[2] said:

"Allah, Most High, has removed from you the pride of the pre-Islamic period and the boasting about one's ancestors. One is only a pious believer or a miserable sinner. You are sons of Adam, and Adam came from earth."

Sunan Abi Dawud (Book 43, Hadith 344)[3]

[1] Quran.com | Translation by Dr. Mustafa Khattab

[2] Peace be Upon Him

[3] https://sunnah.com/abudawud:5116

Malcolm X had a long journey to reach the truth, from a childhood torn apart, through years of anger and darkness, to a spiritual and intellectual awakening.
What revived his heart and gave him a purpose in life, is what we are about to discover.

*This is the life of Malcolm x*, was and will remain, a source of hope and inspiration for generations to come.

### *Alex Haley* [4]

**"**Few are as poignant as Malcolm's memoirs. As testimony to the power of redemption and the force of human personality, the autobiography of Malcolm X is a revelation.**"** [5]

### *Imam Omar Suleiman*

**"**When Ali shakes up the world, we owe Malcolm.
When Chris Jackson, who became Mahmoud AbdulRauf after reading Malcolm's autobiography, we owe Malcolm.

When young black children find beauty in themselves and refuse to internalize toxic bigotry, we owe Malcolm.
He gave us shoulders to stand on and an intellectual foundation to build on.**"** [6]

### *Imam Tom Facchine*

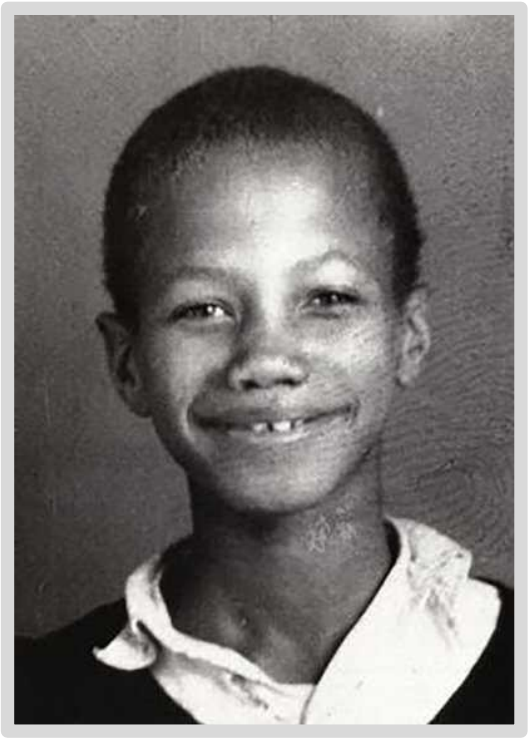
**"**Malcolm's legacy has been so abused intentionally that we as Muslims absolutely have to reclaim it**.** Malcolm was someone who was always dedicated to reinventing himself. When he came into contact with something that was better, he was not stuck in his ways, he was not worried about his brand, he was true to himself.

When he came upon a better way of doing things, a better way of understanding things, he adapted himself. And this is the essence of Islam, when you're confronted with the truth, you comport to the truth.**"** [7]

---

[4] Co-Author of the book "The Autobiography of Malcolm X"
[5] Page 11 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)
[6] https://muslimmatters.org/2018/06/01/reclaiming-malcolm-xs-legacy/
[7] Youtube, Malcolm X's Legacy We Forgot About

# Part 1 | Malcolm Little



## Chapter 1

**Marcus**

The 1920s in The United States, known as the “Roaring Twenties”, was a time of rapid economic growth marked by industrial revolution, technological advancement, and the spread of electricity across the country. Yet behind the image of prosperity, there was a different reality. African Americans had been struggling against oppression and social injustice for nearly three hundred years.

Strict racial segregation laws introduced by “Jim Crow laws” targeting African Americans, caused racial tensions and widespread discrimination that would change the lives of millions of African Americans for generations to come. That period also saw the rise of a white supremacist hate group “The Ku Klux Klan”, which used violence including lynchings and bombings against African Americans.

Despite all this, the African American community was not silent. Different voices and groups stood up to counter all forms of racism, in various ways, some tried to change the

law hoping people would change. Others went as far as claiming the only solution was to return to Africa, the land of ancestors, a call made by "Marcus Garvey (1887–1940)". A Jamaican activist who led a global movement “UNIA - Universal Negro Improvement Association” with the headquarters found in Harlem, New York City,

“A cause which had made Garvey the most controversial Black man on earth” as described by Malcolm [8]. The call of Marcus Garvey was not far from Malcolm’s life, in fact, it was deeply ingrained in his Father, the Reverend *Earl Little*.

Earl -Malcolm’s father- was born in Reynolds, Georgia — six feet four inches tall, very dark-skinned, with only one eye. He had left school early, somewhere around the third or fourth grade, and by the time he had grown up he had already buried four of his six brothers. Three had been killed by white men, one had been lynched.

He was a Baptist minister, though never had a permanent church of his own — always a visiting preacher, moving from congregation to another — and during the week he worked as an organizer for Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, which was raising the banner of racial pride and calling on Black people across the Americas to look toward Africa. Earl Little decided to risk everything to spread this message. It made him, in the eyes of many white people, a very dangerous man.

*Louise Little* -Malcolm's mother- married Earl in Philadelphia, where their first child Wilfred was born. She was from Grenada, in the British West Indies, and she could have passed for white anywhere. Her skin was light, her hair straight and Black, and her accent carried no trace of what white Americans expected to hear from a Black woman. Her father — a white man she had never met, never wanted to meet — was the reason for all of it, and the only feeling she ever expressed about him was shame. Malcolm would later recall hearing her say she was glad she had never seen the man, and that it was because of him that she had her reddish-brown complexion and the texture of her hair.

From Philadelphia the family moved to Omaha, located along the Missouri River, Nebraska, where Hilda and Philbert were born. Earl continued preaching on Sundays, which gradually caught the attention of the white local community. One night, while he was away preaching in Milwaukee, a group of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders came galloping up to the house, surrounding it with shotguns and rifles, shouting for Earl to come out. Louise was pregnant with Malcolm and alone with the three small children. She went to the front door, opened it, and stood where the riders could see her condition, and told

[8] Page 12 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

them her husband was not home. The Klansmen shouted their warnings — that the family had better leave town, and they would prevent Earl spreading trouble among the local Black population with his talk of Africa and Garvey. Then they smashed windows with the butts of their guns before leaving.

The family, however, decided to stay and wait. *Malcolm arrived on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska*. He was the fourth of seven children born to Louise and Earl Little, and the lightest child in the family.

## Lansing

The family did not stay in Omaha for long. They went briefly to Milwaukee, where Reginald was born, then moved again to another city. Malcolm's father wanted land — somewhere he could grow his own food and perhaps build a business, following Garvey's philosophy of independence from the white economy. They settled next in Lansing, Michigan, where he bought a house and quickly started preaching in local Black Baptist churches on Sundays, roaming the surrounding towns conveying Garvey's message.

He also began saving for the small store he had always wanted. But as happened in Omaha, local Black people who wanted no trouble began passing word of Earl's activities to the white people around, triggering another wave of threats. This time they came from a hate group called the Black Legion, which wore Black robes instead of white. Soon, nearly everywhere Earl went, the Legionnaires were there — calling him names, warning him about the consequences of wanting to own a store, of living outside the Black district, and spreading what they called unrest.

Then came the fire. It was 1929, shortly after the birth of Malcolm's youngest sister Yvonne, and it became Malcolm's earliest vivid memory — the night he was snatched out of sleep into a terrifying confusion of gunshots, shouting, smoke, and flames. His father had spotted the two white men who had set the blaze and had fired at them as they ran.

The house was burning around them, and the family stumbled through it in the dark, trying to escape. Malcolm's mother had the baby in her arms, and they barely made it into the yard just before part of the house went down. Malcolm would remember standing outside in his underwear, crying and yelling, watching the police and firemen arrive and stand around as the house burned to the ground.

> "After the fire, I remember that my father was called in and questioned about a permit for the pistol with which he had shot at the white men who set the fire. I remember that the police were always dropping by our house, shoving things around,

"just checking" or "looking for a gun." The pistol they were looking for—which they never found, and for which they wouldn't issue a permit—was sewed up inside a pillow. My father's .22 rifle and his shotgun, though, were right out in the open; everyone had them for hunting birds and rabbits and other game."[9]

On Sundays, as Malcolm recalled, his father would attend sermons, standing behind a pulpit, jumping and shouting, and the congregation jumping and shouting behind him, their souls and bodies given over to singing and prayer. Earl's favorite sermon was about a little Black train that was coming, and you had better get all your business right — a theme Malcolm later connected to Garvey's "Black Train Homeward" slogan and the whole back-to-Africa idea. Philbert, the brother just older than Malcolm, loved the church. However, for Malcolm it was a confusing experience.

"I just couldn't believe in the Christian concept of Jesus as someone divine. And no religious person, until I was a man in my twenties—and then in prison—could tell me anything. I had very little respect for most people who represented religion."[10]

The Garvey meetings were different. Malcolm's father held them in people's living rooms, quietly, in homes scattered around the Lansing area and as far away as Owosso, a town forty miles out that Black people called "White City" because no Black person was allowed on its streets after dark. There were never more than fifteen or twenty people at any of these gatherings. Malcolm was sometimes the only child his father brought along, which influenced Malcolm's personality and no doubt taught him a sense of leadership at an early age.

"I noticed how differently they all acted, although sometimes they were the same people who jumped and shouted in church. But in these meetings, both they and my father were more intense, more intelligent and down to earth. It made me feel the same way."[11]

At these meetings Malcolm heard phrases that would remain with him for the rest of his life: "Adam driven out of the Garden into the caves of Europe," "Africa for the Africans," "Ethiopians, Awake!" His father would talk about a future in which Africa would be run entirely by Black people — "by Black men," was the phrase he always used — and he would quote Garvey's words about the coming redemption. Large, glossy photographs of Marcus

[9] Page 15, (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[10] Page 16 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[11] Page 17 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Garvey were passed from hand to hand, pulled from a big envelope Earl always brought along. The pictures showed what seemed to Malcolm like millions of people marching in parade behind Garvey, who rode in a fine car, a big dark man in a dazzling uniform with gold braid and a hat with tall plumes. The meetings always ended the same way, with Malcolm's father leading the chant and the room following: "Up, you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will!"

The collections from Earl's preaching were the main source of income for the family, along with whatever odd jobs he could find. But the image of his father that made Malcolm proudest was of Earl out campaigning for Garvey's cause. Even as a small child, Malcolm sensed that his father was a strong man. He remembered an old woman at one of the meetings, saying to Earl: "You're scaring these white folks to death!"

### Memories

The situation of Malcolm's family was about to get worse. His parents argued constantly. His mother had a good education while his father had almost none, and an educated woman, as Malcolm would reflect later, can hardly resist correcting an uneducated man. When she put her words on him, he would grab her.

Earl was hard on all the children, too, whipping the older ones severely, all of them except Malcolm, for breaking any of his many rules. Looking back, Malcolm came to believe that his father, for all his devotion to Black pride and Garvey's cause, was still unconsciously affected by the old brainwashing that made people with lighter skin seem better. Malcolm was the lightest child in the family, and Earl treated him more gently than any of the others.

His mother, however, acted the opposite. She was very light-skinned herself, and she seemed to favor the darker children — Wilfred especially, whom she treated as her angel. She would send Malcolm outside to play in the sun, telling him to let it shine on him so he could get some color. She whipped him more than any of the others, though Malcolm had his tricks, if she even looked like she was about to raise her hand to him, Malcolm would open his mouth and yell loud enough for anyone passing on the road to hear, and she would change her mind.

**"I learned early that crying out in protest could accomplish things."**[12]

The family raised chickens and grew their own vegetables in a big garden, and they were better off than most of the Black families in Lansing, where the best a Black man could hope for was a job as a waiter at the Lansing Country Club or a shoeshine boy at the state capitol. The only Black people with real money were the ones running the numbers racket or the gambling houses. No Black workers were hired at the big Oldsmobile plant or the Reo factory. They were mostly either on welfare or starving.

Out in the country, the Littles -Malcolm's family- raised much of what they ate, and they were proud of it. Malcolm asked his mother one day for a little garden plot of his own, and she gave him one, and he took care of it with patience. He loved growing peas especially, pulling the weeds by hand when the first blades of grass appeared, crawling on his hands and knees along the rows looking for insects. And sometimes, when everything was clean and straight, he would lie down on his back between two rows and gaze up at the blue sky and the clouds and let his mind wander.

Malcolm started school at five, walking two miles each morning with Wilfred, Hilda, and Philbert to the Pleasant Grove School, which ran from kindergarten through eighth grade. They were essentially the only Black children in the area. The white kids called them names, so routinely that Malcolm and his siblings grew up thinking these were simply the words people used. The white children did not seem to mean it as anything special — it was just the way they saw the world.

## Orphan 1931

Malcolm was six years old, when one afternoon he came home from school and found his parents in the middle of a fight. The tension in the house had been building for weeks because of new threats from the Black Legion. Worse, Malcolm's father had taken one of the rabbits from the pen, and he simply twisted the head off and threw it at Malcolm's mother's feet for her to cook.

Louise was crying as she began to skin the rabbit. Earl, still furious, slammed out of the front door and started walking down the road toward town.

[12] Page 19 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Malcolm's mother had always been a woman with a powerful sense of intuition, and something seized her in that moment. She ran out onto the porch "screaming his name — Early! Early!". Earl turned around, saw her, and for some reason — considering how angry he had been when he left — he waved at her from far and kept going.

She told Malcolm later that she had a vision of his father's end. All the rest of that afternoon she was not herself. Crying, nervous and upset. When Earl had not come home by bedtime, she gathered the children close and hugged them and held on to them, and they all felt strange, because she had never acted like that before.

Malcolm woke up in the middle of the night to hear his mother screaming. When he stumbled out of bed, he found police officers in the living room, trying to calm her down. She grabbed her clothes to go with them. The children stood there staring, and every one of them knew, without anyone having to say it, that something terrible happened to their father.

Louise was taken by the police to the hospital, and to a room where a sheet covered a bed, and she would not look — she was afraid to look. Earl's skull, on one side, had been crushed. The Black community in Lansing had always whispered that he was attacked and then laid across the streetcar tracks to be run over, and indeed his body had been nearly cut in half. He lived for two and a half hours in that condition.

It was morning when the children at home got the word. The house was filled with people crying, saying bitterly that the Black Legion had finally come for him. Louise was in the bedroom, hysterical, with women holding smelling salts under her nose. She was still hysterical at the funeral.

After the funeral, visitors came to the house for weeks — friends from Lansing and Mason and other towns, people the family had known from the Garvey meetings. The children, who were too young to see what their mother saw, adjusted more easily. But as fewer visitors started to show up, Louise turned her attention to the two insurance policies that Earl had always carried, the ones he had always said would protect the family. The smaller policy paid out without trouble. The larger one did not. The company refused to pay, claiming that Earl Little had committed suicide.

Malcolm's mother became a widow at the age of thirty-four, left alone with no provider, no protector, and eight children to raise. For as long as the first insurance payment lasted, the family held together. Wilfred, the oldest, who had always been steady and responsible,

quietly dropped out of school and went to town looking for work. He took whatever he could find and came home in the evenings exhausted, handing over whatever he earned. Hilda, who had always been quiet, took charge of the younger children. Philbert and Malcolm spent most of their energy fighting each other at home and then teaming up to fight white kids at school.

Louise went out to find work herself. She took jobs in housework and sewing for white families in Lansing. Because she had a light skin, many of the people who hired her never realized she was Black, and the work would go fine — until, one way or another, word got around about whose widow she was. She would get fired and come home crying, trying to hide it from the children, because she needed the work so desperately.

Then the state welfare workers began coming to the house, and nothing was the same after that. They would arrive unannounced, sit with Louise, ask her a thousand questions, and look at the children and around the house in a way that made Malcolm feel — even as a child — that they were not seen as people at all in the eyes of the state. They were inventory, they were numbers and cases.

Louise began receiving two checks — a welfare payment and a widow's pension — but they were never enough. Nearly the first of every month, the family already owed most of the money to the man at the grocery store, and whatever was left did not last long. Malcolm's mother health started to decline, and it was not only physical but psychological. Louise was a proud woman, it was too much for her to be on welfare. She started to lose her temper quickly when dealing with the grocer for padding the bill, or with the welfare workers for meddling in her life, telling them she was a grown woman who could raise her own children, and they did not like that.

> **"**My mother was, above everything else, a proud woman, and it took its toll on her that she was accepting charity. And her feelings were communicated to us.**"** [13]

By 1934, it was all downhill, the family was in real trouble. Some months there was not even a nickel for the bakery in town, where for five cents the children could buy a tall sack of day-old bread and cookies and walk the two miles back home. Louise knew dozens of ways to make a meal out of bread and not much else — stewed tomatoes on bread, bread pudding with raisins if there were eggs, something like French toast. If there was nothing at all, she would boil a pot of dandelion greens and that would the meal for the day.

[13] Page 23 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Neighbors' children would tease them, saying they ate fried grass. If they were lucky, there was oatmeal or cornmeal mush three times a day. Let alone that everything in the house was stamped *Not To Be Sold*. Malcolm began to drift and change—not in a good way, as he would later describe it.

> "The more I began to stay away from home and visit people and steal from the stores, the more aggressive I became in my inclinations. I never wanted to wait for anything."[14]

Instead of going home after school, he would hang around outside the stores, looking for a chance to steal a piece of fruit from a barrel or a basket. He started dropping in at the homes of families he knew, arriving around dinnertime, knowing they would invite him to stay. He liked visiting the Gohannases especially — good, churchgoing people who had a nephew called Big Boy living with them, and an older woman named Mrs. Adcock, who was always visiting the sick and helping anyone she could. She was the one who would say something to Malcolm, years later, that he never forgot:

> "Malcolm, there's one thing I like about you. You're no good, but you don't try to hide it. You are not a hypocrite."[15]

## Torn Apart

Around this time, some Seventh Day Adventists who had moved into a house down the road began visiting Louise. She was drawn to them, Malcolm believed, mainly because their dietary restrictions matched what she had always practiced — no pork, no rabbit, nothing that contradicted the old Mosaic dietary laws she had followed even before Earl's death. The children went along to the Adventist meetings mostly for the food, which was the main attraction. The Adventists were the friendliest white people Malcolm had ever met, though they had their own strange ideas — they believed they were living at the end of time, and that the world would soon end.

Meanwhile, the welfare workers began following a different strategy. They would pull the older children aside — one at a time, out on the porch or in their cars — and ask them questions designed to plant seeds of division. Who was smarter, they would ask. Why was

[14] Page 26 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[15] Page 26 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Malcolm so different? Malcolm believed they saw getting the children into foster homes as a legitimate part of their job, and that the easiest way to get there was to separate the children from their mother and from each other, however they had to go about it.

> **"**They were as vicious as vultures. They had no feelings, understanding, compassion, or respect for my mother. They told us, "She's crazy for refusing food." Right then was when our home, our unity, began to disintegrate. We were having a hard time, and I wasn't helping. But we could have made it, we could have stayed together. As bad as I was, as much trouble and worry as I caused my mother, I loved her.**"**[16]

The opportunity they needed came when Louise refused a gift of butchered pork from a Black neighbor — a whole pig, perhaps two — on the grounds that eating pork was against her religion as a Seventh Day Adventist. The welfare workers called her crazy for turning down good meat while her children were going hungry. The children heard them say it. From that moment, something inside the house began to fall apart. Soon after, Malcolm's mother began to talk to herself, to walk around the house as though the children were not there. She became less responsive to them, less aware.

The state people watched all of it, and when she weakened enough, they moved. They began telling Malcolm how nice it would be for him to live with the Gohannases, where Big Boy and the family all said they would love to have him. Malcolm liked those people, too — but he did not want to leave Wilfred, whom he looked up to, or Hilda, who was like a second mother, or Philbert, with whom he shared even in their fighting a kind of brotherly bond, or Reginald, the little one who depended on him. When Louise heard about the plan, she fought it for a while, but she was overwhelmed and eventually broken.

When the day finally came for Malcolm to leave the house, his mother looked at the state man who had come to take him and said one thing:

> **"**Don't let them feed him any pig.**"**[17]

Eventually she collapsed and the court orders were signed. Malcom's mother was committed to the State Mental Hospital at Kalamazoo, about seventy miles from Lansing. A judge named McClellan in Lansing had full authority over Malcolm and all his brothers and sisters. They became "state children" now — the property of the system. A white man in charge of a Black man's children, as Malcolm recalled.

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[16] Page 29 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[17] Page 30 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

The siblings were dispersed among foster homes and homes of relatives. Wilfred and Hilda, old enough to manage on their own, stayed in the house their father had built. Philbert was placed with a family in Lansing, Mrs. Hackett. Reginald and Wesley went to live with a family called Williams, friends of Louise's. Yvonne and Robert were taken in by a West Indian family named McGuire. Separated by the state, they stayed close in every other way — at school and out of it, whenever they could get together. Malcolm would later say with the certainty:

**"**I truly believe that if ever a state social agency destroyed a family, it destroyed ours. We wanted and tried to stay together. Our home didn't have to be destroyed.**"**[18]

Malcolm settled in at the Gohannases' house, shared a room with Big Boy, and attended their sanctified church, where people jumped even higher and shouted even louder than the Baptists he had known as a small child. He changed schools to West Junior High, which was at the heart of the Black community in Lansing. On Saturdays, Mr. Gohannas and his friends would take Malcolm and Big Boy rabbit hunting, and Malcolm, who had his father's .22 rifle, turned out to be very good at it. The old men had a set strategy — they would wait for a dog to jump a rabbit, knowing the rabbit would instinctively run a wide circle and return to the spot where it had started, and they would sit there and take their shots when it came back around. Malcolm studied what they did, and then he improved on it: he figured out where along the circle the rabbit would pass first, separated from the group, and waited at that point. He started getting three and four rabbits before the old men had gotten one and they never figured out how he did it.

Louise remained at the state hospital for twenty-six years. In 1963, the family finally got her out, and she went to live with Philbert and his family in Lansing. But during all those years, Malcolm would go to see her whenever he could, and every visit was harder than the one before. His last trip — the one where he knew he would never go back — was in 1952. He was twenty-seven years old.

She did not recognize Malcolm at all.

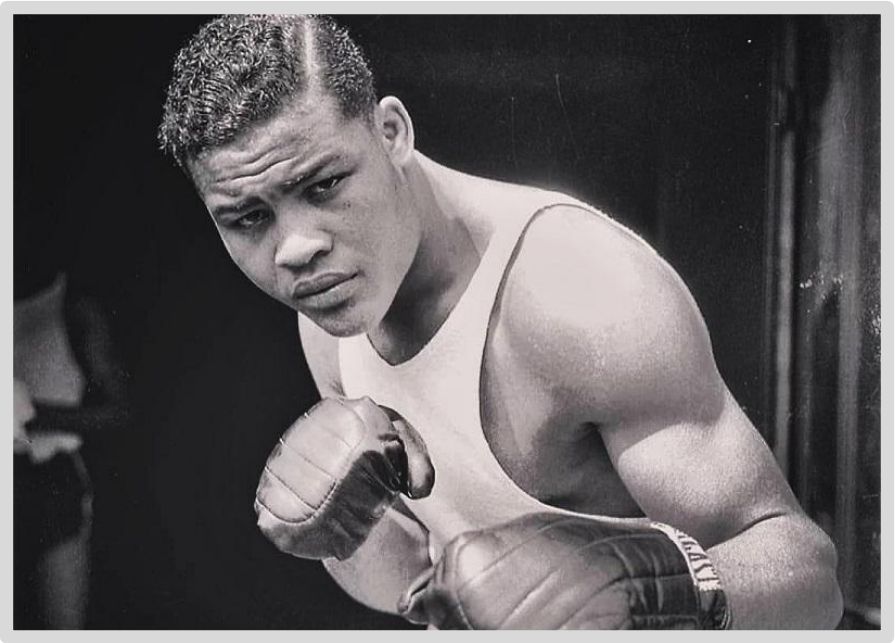
"Mama, do you know what day it is?" Malcolm asked

She said, staring: "All the people have gone."[19]

[18] Page 33 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[19] Page 32 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Chapter 2



[20]

## The Brown Bomber

Malcolm was thirteen when Joe Louis became the heavyweight champion of the world in 1937. Big celebrations took place in Lansing, and not surprisingly, everyone wanted to become the next Joe Louis, including Malcolm.

Joe was twenty-three years old, the son of Alabama sharecroppers, when he stood at the top of the most visible arena in American life — and every Black boy now wanted to follow him.

Philbert, Malcolm's older brother, was already building a reputation as a talented young boxer at school, and that fall he entered the amateur tournaments held at Prudden Auditorium in Lansing. He moved through the early rounds with an easy confidence that drew real crowds.

Malcolm decided he would become a boxer too. He was around thirteen, tall and thin, and his long frame and angular build made it easy to lie about his age to meet the minimum of sixteen. At roughly a hundred and twenty-eight pounds, he was classified as

[20] thefightcity.com/joe-louis-max-schmeling-boxing-upsets/young-joe-louis-classic-shot-crop/

a bantamweight. They matched him against a white novice named Bill Peterson in an amateur round.

His brothers, his sisters, and most of the people he knew in town were there mainly to see Philbert, but curious about how his younger brother, Malcolm, would do. Malcolm walked down the aisle through the packed seats, climbed through the ropes, and stood in his corner while the referee gave the standard instructions about clean fighting. When the bell rang, both boys came out cautiously. Malcolm was scared, though he did not know until later that Peterson was also scared. He was so scared, in fact, that Peterson threw everything he had from the opening seconds, and Malcolm went down repeatedly.

The loss carried a weight that went far beyond the ring. In Black Lansing, in an era when sports were one of the very few arenas where a Black man could compete openly against white men, getting beaten that badly by a white opponent was a humiliation that followed you home. Malcolm practically disappeared from the neighborhood for a time, and when he did resurface, the teasing was relentless. Worst of all was Reginald, who never said a single word about the fight — it was the silence, and the way his younger brother avoided his eyes, which hurt the most.

Malcolm didn't give up and went back to the gym. He trained hard for weeks, punching bags, jumping rope, pushing himself harder, and when he felt ready, he signed up for a rematch against Peterson. This second fight took place in Peterson's hometown of Alma, Michigan.

> **"**The only thing better about the rematch was that hardly anyone I knew was there to see it; I was particularly grateful for Reginald's absence. The moment the bell rang, I saw a fist, then the canvas coming up, and ten seconds later the referee was saying "Ten!" over me. It was probably the shortest "fight" in history. I lay there listening to the full count, but I couldn't move. To tell the truth, I'm not sure I wanted to move.**"**[21]

Not long after the second Peterson fight, Malcolm walked into class one day wearing his hat, trying to cover up his face. The teacher, a white man, told him to keep it on and walk around the room in circles until he was told to stop, so that the whole class could get a good look at him while they continued their lesson. Malcolm circled the room until the teacher rose from his desk and turned to write on the Blackboard. With every eye in the room watching, Malcolm silently passed behind the teacher's chair, plucked a thumbtack

[21] Page 35 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

from the desk, and pressed it point-up into the seat cushion. By the time the teacher sat back down and felt the heat, Malcolm was already through the door and gone.

Given his record, the expulsion was not a surprise. Even worse, a state welfare worker he had never met before appeared at the Gohannases' house, collected him, and brought him to court, where he learned that he was being sent to a reform school. He was still thirteen years old. But before reform school itself, there was the detention home — a holding facility in Mason, Michigan, about twelve miles from Lansing, where juveniles from Ingham County waited for their hearings.

The welfare worker who drove him there was a man named Maynard Allen, and he was kinder than most of the state people Malcolm had dealt with. On the ride to Mason, Allen told the boy that his school grades showed real ability, and that reform school was not the dead-end people imagined — the word "reform" itself meant a chance to change, to start over. He told Malcolm that the woman who ran the detention home, Mrs. Swerlin and her husband were decent people.

### The Swerlins

The Swerlins were, by any reasonable measure, good people. Mrs. Swerlin was a large, warm, and talkative woman, and her husband was lean and quiet, dark-haired with a dark mustache and a ruddy complexion, polite to everyone, including Malcolm. They liked him, Mrs. Swerlin gave him his own room — the first he had ever had in his life — in one of the big dormitory buildings where detained juveniles were housed. He was allowed to eat at the family table rather than with the other kids, and it was the first time since the Seventh Day Adventist country gatherings that he had shared meals with white. There was a cook named Lucille Lathrop and her husband Duane, who spent weekends at the detention home, and they were friendly to him too.

Malcolm fell into the household daily routine easily. He mopped and dusted, the way he had done at the Gohannases' home, and the Swerlins praised his attitude and his willingness to help.

They talked about everything in front of him — personal matters, town gossip, opinions about the world — the way, as he later put it, that people speak freely as if they were in front of a household pet. The word they used for Black people, nigger, which they and their guests used regularly each day, rolled out with no self-consciousness at all, as though

Malcolm was invisible. One afternoon, Mr. Swerlin came home from a drive through the Black section of Lansing and remarked, right in front of Malcolm, that he could not understand how those people could seem so content while living in such poverty. And Mrs. Swerlin replied, with Malcolm standing there, that Black people were simply like that.

The local politicians and officials who visited the Swerlins treated the subject of Black people in the same manner. The judge who oversaw Malcolm's case was a close friend of the family, and when he visited, he would call Malcolm into the room and look him over with the appraising expression of a man examining a well-bred animal. Malcolm could tell the Swerlins had reported favorably on his behavior.

> "What I am trying to say is that it just never dawned upon them that I could understand, that I wasn't a pet, but a human being. They didn't give me credit for having the same sensitivity, intellect, and understanding that they would have been ready and willing to recognize in a white boy in my position."[22]

### Mason

His hearing for reform school came up two or three times, and each time it was quietly set aside. It took some time until Mrs. Swerlin managed to get him enrolled at Mason Junior High School, the only school in town, while he was still technically a resident of the detention home.

Mason was a small, almost entirely white town, and the only other Black students at the school were the younger children of the Lyons family, who were among the town's only Black residents. Mr. Lyons was a hardworking man, and Mrs. Lyons was a woman Malcolm's own mother had spoken of with respect — they were both West Indian, two of the four West Indians in that part of Michigan. The Lyonses were well regarded in the community, and Malcolm, when he eventually moved in with them for his final two months before leaving Michigan, found in their household a warmth that reminded him of his own family.

At school, Malcolm became popular. Some of the white students were closer than the kids he had known in Lansing. He was, as far as the school was concerned, a kind of novelty — the only Black student in his grade — and his status was further elevated by

[22] Page 38 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Mrs. Swerlin's standing in the community. Nobody in Mason wanted to cross her. Before long, Malcolm was being recruited for the debating society, the basketball team, and every other extracurricular activity the school had to offer.

Mrs. Swerlin helped him to find a job, washing dishes at a local restaurant after school. The family lived above the restaurant, and Malcolm spent a lot of time with them. When his first real paycheck came at the end of the week, it was the first money he had ever truly earned and kept for himself. He bought a green suit and a pair of shoes, and at school he would buy treats for his classmates with the change he had left over.

English and history were Malcolm's favorite subjects. His history teacher, Mr. Williams, left some scars though. On Malcolm's first day in the class, Williams broke into a mocking song about Black people in cotton fields, performing it for the class as a joke. When the textbook eventually arrived at the section on Black history, it had only a single paragraph, and Williams read through it in one breath, adding his own rude commentary about laziness, ignorance, and the size of Black people's feet.

> "English and history were the subjects I liked most. My English teacher, I recall—a Mr. Ostrowski—was always giving advice about how to become something in life. The one thing I didn't like about history class was that the teacher, Mr. Williams, was a great one for "nigger" jokes."[23]

Basketball became central to his life at Mason. He was part of the team, and they traveled to neighboring towns for games — Howell, Charlotte, and others. In every gymnasium he entered, the spectators in the stands hurled racial slurs at him all the time. His teammates and his coach seemed barely to notice. The taunts were always part of the game, and he became numb to them.

In the second semester of seventh grade, the class elected him president. Even Malcolm was surprised. His grades had consistently placed him near the top of the school, along with a girl named Audrey Slaugh and a boy named Jimmy Cotton. Mrs. Swerlin was overjoyed. The news spread through the restaurant where he worked. Even Maynard Allen, who still checked in on him from time to time, told him he was proving what the word "reform" really meant.

On Saturdays he would ride into Lansing. Wilfred and Hilda were still living at the old family house, Hilda keeping it clean, Wilfred working odd jobs to survive. Philbert was

[23] Page 40 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

developing into one of the better amateur fighters in the region. Malcolm visited Reginald and Wesley at Mrs. Williams's house, and the younger ones — Yvonne and Robert — at Mrs. McGuire's. He would give each of them some money from his pay. None of the siblings talked much about their mother, and they never mentioned their father.

### Ella

Toward the end of Malcolm's seventh-grade year, a woman named Ella, who would play a pivotal role in his life, came from Boston. She was Malcolm's half-sister, his father's daughter from an earlier marriage. Wilfred and Hilda had been exchanging letters with her for some time.

Malcolm came home from school one afternoon and there she was. She was a commanding presence — tall, possibly even larger than Mrs. Swerlin, and very dark-skinned, like their father. Everything about her, the way she moved, the way she spoke, conveyed a strong and determined character. She was, Malcolm would later say, the first truly proud Black woman he had ever met.

Their father had often spoken of Ella with admiration. She had come north from Georgia with nothing, worked and saved, invested in property, and then began sending money south so that one relative after another — a sister, a brother, a cousin, a niece — could make the same journey to Boston. She asked about Malcolm's grades, and he ran to get his report cards, proud to show her that he was near the top of his class. She told him about their half-brother Earl, who was singing with a band in Boston under the name Jimmy Carleton, and their half-sister Mary, who was doing well too.

She spoke with such pride that Malcolm had nearly forgotten it was possible. The Little children were scattered across foster homes and relatives' houses. Malcolm had grown so accustomed to being a ward of the state, a mascot in someone else's household, that the idea of belonging to a family with its own momentum and direction had nearly faded.

Ella suggested that they all go together to visit their mother at the state hospital in Kalamazoo. For the first time, the Little children made the trip as a group, with Ella leading the way. Their mother smiled when she saw them and was surprised when Ella appeared. The two women embraced — Malcolm's mother tiny and light-skinned, Ella tall and very dark, the contrast between them was obvious. There was a great deal of talking, and Ella handled the visit together with calm authority, and when they left, every one of

the children felt better about their mother's situation than they ever had before. For the first time, Malcolm believed there was some hope for his mother to recover and the family to reunite.

A few days later, Ella returned to Boston, but before she left, she told Malcolm to write to her regularly. And she suggested: maybe he would like to spend the coming summer in Boston, Malcolm loved the idea.

### New World

In the summer of 1940, Malcolm boarded a Greyhound bus in Lansing wearing his green suit and carrying a cardboard suitcase, looking, as he cheerfully admitted later, like a complete country boy. The highways were still two-lane roads in those days, and the bus seemed to stop at every crossroads and farm town between Michigan and Massachusetts. He rode in the back and stared out the window at a country he had never seen.

Ella met him at the terminal, then she took him where she lived at the Sugar Hill section of Roxbury, Boston's Black neighborhood, its own version of Harlem. He met Ella's second husband, Frank, who was in the military, and he saw Earl and Mary again. What overwhelmed him, though, was not the house or the family but the new world of Boston.

He had never seen such a big community of Black people. Downtown Roxbury on a Saturday night looked very different to Malcolm— neon lights, pool halls, restaurants sending the rich smell of Southern cooking into the street, jukeboxes playing Erskine Hawkins and Duke Ellington and Cootie Williams. People talked casually about Chicago, Detroit, New York, as though those cities were just down the road. The biggest bands played at the Roseland State Ballroom on Massachusetts Avenue — one night for Black audiences, the next for white. He saw Black couples and mixed couples walking arm in arm as if it was normal. On Sundays, when Ella took him to church, he saw Black congregations worshiping in buildings that were bigger than any white church he had known in Michigan, the services were alive with such intensity and breadth of expression as he had never seen.

He wrote a couple of letters back to Wilfred, saying he would try to describe it all when he returns. But when he returned to Mason for eighth grade, he was captivated by the experience in Boston. For the first time in his life, he had experienced what it felt like to be part of a large Black community — not a mascot, but simply a person among his own

people. The feeling remained with him, and he began to see the world around him through a different lens.

### Can't Dream

Back at Mason Junior High for eighth grade, Malcolm's mind was still in Boston. His classmates, the Swerlins, and his coworkers at the restaurant — noticed that Malcolm changed. They asked him what was wrong, and he was acting strangely. He kept his grades near the top of the class, but the ease of interacting with the world around him was gone.

Then, one afternoon during the first semester, as classmates who had passed their exams were preparing to move up to the division that would feed into high school, Malcolm found himself alone in the class with his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski. Ostrowski was a tall, reddish-skinned man with a thick mustache, known around the school for giving advice about careers and ambitions with an enthusiasm the students sometimes made jokes about. He had given Malcolm some of his highest marks. He appeared to like Malcolm, but what happened next, according to Malcolm, was a big turning point in his life.

Ostrowski asked Malcolm whether he had been thinking about a career. Malcolm told him he considered law, although he didn't really think about the answer, he just thought that there were no Black lawyers or doctors in Lansing, in any case. He knew only that a lawyer did not wash dishes for a living. Ostrowski leaned back in his chair, his hands behind his head, and replied:

> **"**Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer — that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands — making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person — you'd get all kinds of work.**"**[24]

[24] Page 47 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Malcolm did not argue with him. He left the room shocked and confused. What made it unbearable was not just what Ostrowski had said to him, but what Ostrowski had said to everyone else. Malcolm's white classmates had come to Ostrowski with ambitions of their own — teacher, veterinarian, county agent, nurse — and without exception, Ostrowski had encouraged them. Most of those students were planning to be farmers. The few who wanted something different had been told to go for it. Nearly none of them had grades as high as Malcolm's.

It was clear he was smarter than almost every white kid in his class, and they all knew it, and yet what Ostrowski saw when he looked at Malcolm — what the whole town saw, what even the Swerlins, who genuinely liked him, saw — was a category, not a person.

**"**It was then that I began to change — inside.**"**[25] Malcolm said.

He pulled away from the white world that had surrounded him for years. He went to class but volunteered nothing. The word "nigger" that had once rolled off his back — the word they all used, the Swerlins, the teachers, the kids in the stands at basketball games — sounded now different. He would turn and look at whoever had said it, and they would look back with surprise. And people around him started to ask: what happened, what's wrong with you, why have you changed? Silence was Malcolm's response.

Mrs. Swerlin eventually called him into the living room, where Maynard Allen was waiting. She told him, with sadness, that nobody could understand why — after all his success, his grades, his job, his election, the warmth everyone in Mason had shown him — he seemed unhappy. She said she had arranged for him to leave the detention home and move in with the Lyons family. She stood and extended her hand, and asked, one final time, whether he would tell her what was wrong.

He shook her hand and said nothing, then went upstairs to pack his clothes. When he came back down to the living room doorway, he saw her wiping her tears. He felt bad about that. He thanked her, walked outside to where Maynard Allen was waiting, and rode to the Lyonses' house.

For two months, while he finished eighth grade, he lived with the Lyons family, who tried just as hard as the Swerlins had to figure out why he changed, and could not. Almost every day he wrote to Ella in Boston, saying how desperately he wanted to come and live there. He did not explain why. Ella, as expected, arranged for his legal custody to be

[25] Page 48 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

transferred from Michigan to Massachusetts, and the week he finished eighth grade, Malcolm headed again by bus for Boston.

> **"**Whatever I have done since then, I have driven myself to become a success at it. I've often thought that if Mr. Ostrowski had encouraged me to become a lawyer, I would today probably be among some city's professional Black bourgeoisie, sipping cocktails and palming myself off as a community spokesman for and leader of the suffering Black masses, while my primary concern would be to grab a few more crumbs from the groaning board of the two-faced whites with whom they're begging to "integrate." All praise is due to Allah that I went to Boston when I did. If I hadn't, I'd probably still be a brainwashed Black Christian.**"** [26]

[26] Page 50 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Part 2 | Malcolm Red

## Chapter 3

Malcolm X and Ella Little-Collins House [27]
(Designated a City landmark by the Boston Landmarks Commission)

### Boston

It was the summer of 1941 when Malcolm moved to Roxbury, Boston. Everything about him looked country, as he later recalled. His reddish short hair, and his green suit—bought at a department store back in Lansing—had sleeves that ended well above his wrists and pants that revealed three inches of his socks. Even Ella looked at him in surprise when she first saw him.

Ella had prepared a bedroom upstairs in her home. As soon as they arrived, she cooked an unforgettable feast for Malcolm, plates heaped with ham hocks and greens, Black-eyed

[27] https://www.boston.gov/departments/archaeology/malcolm-x-house
https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/malcolm-x-ella-little-collins-house

peas and fried fish, sweet potatoes, cornbread and grits in gravy, and she measured her success by how much you put away. Malcolm ate everything and kept asking for more.

She had recently separated from her second husband. Ella was not a woman who allowed disruption to slow her down. She had a commanding presence — she managed whatever room she entered, and everyone in it, whether they agreed to be managed or not.

On his second day in Roxbury, Ella told him not to look for work—not yet. Most Black newcomers from the South, she said, tied themselves to a job the moment they arrived and never got the chance to know the city they had moved to. She wanted him to ride the buses and the subway, walk around the neighborhoods, take his time, and get to know the place. She would help him find work when the time was right.

Malcolm started exploring the areas around where he lived. What he found there was a world of Black families who had constructed an elaborate social order almost entirely around appearances. They called themselves the "Four Hundred," and they regarded the Black residents in the lower section of Roxbury, the so-called "Ghetto" area, with open contempt.

> **"**These Negroes walked along the sidewalks looking haughty and dignified, on their way to work, to shop, to visit, to church. I know now, of course, that what I was really seeing was only a big-city version of those "successful" Negro bootBlacks and janitors back in Lansing. The only difference was that the ones in Boston had been brainwashed even more thoroughly. They prided themselves on being incomparably more "cultured," "cultivated," "dignified," and better off than their Black brethren down in the ghetto, which was no further away than you could throw a rock. Under the pitiful misapprehension that it would make them "better," these Hill Negroes were breaking their backs trying to imitate white people.**"**[28]

Ella wanted Malcolm to spend his time among the young people on the Hill, the ones she considered good company, the crowd that hung around the Townsend Drugstore near their block. But Malcolm had always been drawn to people older than himself. Back in Lansing, on weekends when he left Mason to spend time in the Black part of town, he had

[28] Page 52 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

run with Wilfred's and Philbert's crowd, all of them several years older, and his height made him look as though he was their age. He had no interest in the teenagers on the hill.

Against Ella's wish, he found himself hanging around the lower section of Roxbury—the neighborhood of walk-up apartments and cheap restaurants, poolrooms and storefront churches and pawn shops, where his other half-sister, Mary, lived. He felt more at ease there, among people who were being themselves.

For his first month, Malcolm was very much attached to that part of town. The young men who hung around the poolrooms and on the street corners—men who clearly did not hold regular employment—fascinated him completely. Their hair was straight and glossy, a "conk," and their clothes were sharp in a way he had never encountered in Michigan. They used words he had never heard: "cat" and "stud" and "cool" and "hip." At night, lying in bed back on the Hill, he turned the new vocabulary over in his mind all night long.

Beyond Roxbury, Malcolm wandered through the wider city, past old brick buildings layered with historical plaque and monuments to events and people he had never learned about in school. On Boston Common, he came upon a statue of Crispus Attucks—a Black man who had been the first person killed in the Boston Massacre of 1770—and the discovery astonished him. Nothing at school back in Michigan had ever mentioned such a figure.

He walked as far as Boston University. He took his first subway ride and followed the crowd when most passengers got off, which brought him to Cambridge and the grounds of Harvard. He had heard the name somewhere before but knew almost nothing about the place. He could not have imagined that roughly twenty years later, he would stand before the Harvard Law School Forum and deliver a speech.

He explored the waterfront, reading plaques about old sailing ships. He stood in both of Boston's train stations, North Station and South Station, watching travelers arrive and leave, puzzled at why any city needed two. He wrote to his siblings about the narrow cobblestoned streets and the buildings packed close together and the enormous downtown stores, the air-conditioned movie theaters, the restaurants and hotels that belonged to the white world.

On Massachusetts Avenue, near the Loew's State Theater, Malcolm came upon the Roseland State Ballroom. Posters out front advertised the nationally famous bands—white and Black—that performed there. The sign read that Glenn Miller was coming the

following week. Malcolm thought of the school dances at Mason High, where the music had been almost entirely Glenn Miller's records, and he wondered what those kids back in Michigan would have given to stand where the actual band was about to perform.

## Homeboy

Malcolm by now was looking for a job. Malcolm one day noticed a poolroom from the sidewalk—not because he wanted to play, since he had never held a cue stick, but because the young men inside, with their conked hair and easy confidence, made him curious. One of the workers—a compact, dark-skinned man with a conk who racked balls for the players—had noticed Malcolm standing outside and called out: "Hi, Red." That was enough for Malcolm to sense that the man was friendly.

One afternoon he slipped inside, and stood at the back of the room, where the man everyone called Shorty was filling a container with chalk powder. Malcolm asked him, how a person might go about getting a job like his. Years later, Shorty would laugh and tease Malcolm about that first meeting:

> "Man, that cat still smelled country! Cat's legs was so long and his pants so short his knees showed" [29]

But that afternoon Shorty just looked at him and asked what kind of work Malcolm had done before. Malcolm told him he washed dishes in a restaurant in Mason, Michigan. Shorty nearly dropped what he was holding.

> "My homeboy! Man, gimme some skin! I'm from Lansing!" [30]

Shorty grew up in Lansing, dropped out during his first year of high school, spent time with relatives in Detroit, and had been living with a cousin in Roxbury for the past six years. He was roughly ten years older than Malcolm, though neither of them realized it—Malcolm never mentioned his age, and Shorty assumed they were about the same. Once they started trading the names of Lansing people and places, the bond was immediate, as though they had grown up on the same block.

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[29] Page 55 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[30] Page 56 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

> "Man, this is a swinging town if you dig it," Shorty said. "You're my homeboy—I'm going to school you to the happenings."[31]

One of the things Malcolm liked about Shorty right away was his frankness. When Malcolm told him where he lived, Shorty said what Malcolm already suspected—that nobody around here could stand the Hill crowd. But he conceded that a sister who let you live rent-free and didn't pressure you to find work was probably all right. Shorty's own job, he explained, was just a way to get by while he studied music. A couple of years earlier he had won some money playing the numbers and used it to buy an alto saxophone, which sat in a closet in his room. He was taking lessons and planned to organize his own small band someday.

All afternoon, between trips to the front to rack up the next game, Shorty talked, pointing out which of the men at the tables were hustlers, which ones sold drugs, which ones had done time in prison. He played the numbers every day—at least a dollar—and as soon as he hit big, he said, the winnings would go toward putting his band together. He introduced Malcolm around the room: "My homeboy—he's looking for a slave if you hear anything." In the local slang, a "slave" meant a job. Everyone said they would keep an eye out.

At seven o'clock, when the night shift arrived, Shorty had to leave for his saxophone lesson. But before he went, he held out the six or seven dollars in tips he had collected over the course of the day and asked Malcolm if he had enough money. Malcolm said he was fine—he had two dollars. Shorty pressed three more into his hand. Then he opened his saxophone case so Malcolm could see the instrument, gleaming brass against green velvet, and told him to come back the next day.

> "Keep cool, homeboy, and come back tomorrow. Some of the cats will turn you up a slave."[32]

That evening, Ella, though she wasn't pleased, told Malcolm that someone named Shorty had called. The shoeshine boy at the Roseland State Ballroom was quitting that night, and Shorty had arranged for Malcolm to take the position. He got so excited and left that night without even having dinner.

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[31] Page 56 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[32] Page 46 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## Roseland

The ballroom was vibrant when Malcolm arrived. Members of Benny Goodman's band were filing through the entrance. Malcolm told the doorman he was there to see the shoeshine boy, Freddie. The man looked him over, smiled, and told him Freddie was upstairs in the second-floor men's room. Before he went up, Malcolm stepped to the edge of the ballroom and looked inside. The dance floor was enormous and gleaming, and at the far end, beneath soft rose-colored lights, the Goodman musicians were unpacking their instruments, adjusting their stands, talking and laughing among themselves.

Upstairs, Freddie—a wiry, brown-skinned man with a conk—greeted him warmly. He had just hit a big number and was about to buy himself a Cadillac, which meant he was done shining shoes. He told Malcolm to observe everything and keep clear of the customers; within two nights, Malcolm would need to handle the stand on his own.

Freddie showed him the layout of the shoeshine stand—rags and brushes on one side, polish bottles and paste wax on the other, everything positioned so you could move without thinking when the rush came. The job was not only shining shoes; you watched for men leaving the restroom and darted over with a hand towel, which usually earned a nickel tip at minimum. You gave everyone a pass with the whiskbroom. The real income came from the tips, and the tips depended on the show you put on.

> "While you shined shoes, you also kept watch on customers inside, leaving the urinals. You darted over and offered a small white hand towel. "A lot of cats who ain't planning to wash their hands, sometimes you can run up with a towel and shame them. Your towels are really your best hustle here. Cost you a penny apiece to launder—you always get at least a nickel tip."[33]

Freddie taught him the actual recipe of a shine—brush, liquid polish, brush again, paste wax, the rag, sole dressing—and then demonstrated how to snap the shine rag so it cracked, a noise with no purpose that nevertheless made customers tip better. He taught him about selling shoelaces at a markup, and about the other small hustle opportunities that came with the job.

[33] Page 59 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

By closing time, Malcolm had shined a few pairs of shoes that Freddie steered his way. They helped the janitors clean the ballroom afterward, sweeping up paper and cigarette butts and empty bottles, and then Freddie drove him home in his secondhand maroon Buick, talking all the way about the job's finer points. He told Malcolm that a sharp shoeshine boy who worked everything right could pull in ten or twelve dollars in a single night.

The last thing Freddie said, as they pulled up to Ella's place on the Hill:

> **"**The main thing you got to remember is that everything in the world is a hustle. So long, Red.**"** [34]

## The Conk

Malcolm's life in Boston started to take a different direction. He started spending his nights with Shorty and his friends, gathering at someone's apartment where the group would drink, smoke, play cards, shoot dice, bet on the numbers. He could not pinpoint the exact night he had his first drink, or his first cigarette. It all ran together with the dice and the card games and the daily dollar he began putting down on the numbers.

Shorty's jokes about how country Malcolm looked when he first arrived became part of the group's running humor. Malcolm knew he was still country, but that didn't matter. He had found his tribe.

Everyone in the group understood that Malcolm's hair had to keep growing before it could be processed. When he mentioned one evening that he had been saving up for a zoot suit, Shorty could not believe what he was hearing. Saving? The next morning Shorty called a neighborhood clothing store, and Malcolm arrived early. A young salesman greeted him—he knew Shorty, of course; everyone did—and filled out a credit application with Malcolm's work address at Roseland and home address at Ella's. The suit the salesman pulled from the rack was sky-blue, with pants measuring thirty inches at the knee and tapering to twelve at the ankle, a long coat that cinched at the waist and flared past the knees, and a leather belt. Malcolm added a blue hat with a feather in the brim.

When Ella saw Malcolm in the zoot, she looked at him for a long moment and said, "Well, I guess it had to happen."

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[34] Page 61 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He paid twenty-five cents apiece for three sepia-toned photographs of himself, posed the way the hipsters posed—hat tilted to one side, knees drawn together, feet wide apart, both index fingers jabbing toward the floor. The long coat and the swinging chain looked best if you stood that way. He sent one photo to his brothers and sisters in Lansing so they could see how well he was doing, gave one to Ella, and handed the third to Shorty, who took it with "Thanks, Homeboy.

When Malcolm's hair had finally grown long enough, Shorty declared it was time. He promised to show Malcolm the homemade method, a way to avoid the three- or four-dollar fee at the barbershop. Malcolm gathered the ingredients from a list Shorty had written out: a can of Red Devil lye, two eggs, and two medium-sized white potatoes from the grocery store; from a nearby drugstore, a large jar of vaseline, a bar of soap, a large-toothed comb, a fine-toothed comb, a rubber hose with a spray nozzle, a rubber apron, and a pair of gloves. The man behind the drugstore counter saw the collection and asked if Malcolm was getting his first conk. Malcolm grinned and told him yes.

They worked in Shorty's cousin's apartment—a small room in a worn-down building that cost six dollars a week, though the cousin was rarely around. Shorty peeled the potatoes and sliced them thin into a glass jar, then stirred in half a can of lye with a wooden spoon. Never a metal spoon, he warned—the lye would eat through it. He cracked the two eggs into the mixture and stirred fast, bending close over the jar as the congolene turned a pale yellowish color. When he told Malcolm to touch the outside of the jar, Malcolm pulled his hand away instantly. The lye was generating fierce heat, and Shorty explained that the burning was what would straighten the hair—the longer you could stand it, the straighter the result.

He tied the rubber apron around Malcolm's neck, combed out his hair, and worked thick vaseline through it and over his neck, ears, and forehead as a protective barrier. He pulled on the rubber gloves and his own apron and warned Malcolm to speak up at the first sign of stinging during the rinse. Then he began combing the congolene into Malcolm's hair.

At first it just felt warm. Then the burning started. Malcolm gripped the edges of the kitchen table. His eyes watered, his nose ran. When he could not take it a second longer, he threw himself at the washbasin, where Shorty lathered and rinsed, lathered and rinsed, ten or twelve times, each round a little cooler than the last until the water was cold. Shorty checked for any remaining congolene on his scalp, then toweled his head dry, rubbing

hard enough that Malcolm shouted at him to ease up. He re-applied vaseline, drew the large comb straight back through the hair, then the fine comb, then shaped the neckline with a razor and trimmed the sideburns.

Then he let Malcolm stand up and look in the mirror. What Malcolm saw made him forget all the pain he went through. His reddish hair, kinky all his life, now lay flat and smooth, a glossy sheen of deep red hanging straight. In the mirror, Shorty stood behind him, and both were grinning and sweating. Malcolm vowed that night that he would never go without a conk, and for many years after, he kept his word.

Malcolm, however, would reflect on that evening years later:

> **"**This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the Black people are 'inferior'—and white people 'superior'—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look 'pretty' by white standards.**"**[35]

He saw the conk—on himself and on every Black man or woman who chemically processed or wigged their natural hair—as a visible sign that a person had accepted, at the most basic physical level, the notion that what they were born with was not good enough. He had been as devoted to the practice as anyone, he admitted, and more faithful to it than most.

> **"**I'm speaking from personal experience when I say of any Black man who conks today, or any white-wigged Black woman, that if they gave the brains in their heads just half as much attention as they do their hair, they would be a thousand times better off.**"**[36]

[35] Page 66 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[36] Page 67 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Chapter 4

## The Big Apple

Malcolm's life was changing fast, and soon the shoe-shining job was behind him. New York City was his next dream.

> **"**New York was heaven to me, and Harlem was Seventh Heaven.**"**[37]

World War II and the surprise attack by Japan on the naval base at Pearl Harbor caused men to leave jobs at railroad stations and join the US Army. An elderly Pullman porter named Rountree — a member of Ella's church — saw an opening. He told Ella that if her younger brother could pass for twenty-one, he could get on with the New Haven Line. Ella so badly wanted Malcolm out of Boston, away from Shorty and his friends. She preferred to see him in the Army's khaki, but at sixteen he was too young to enlist, and the railroad job was the best fit.

It was an opportunity that Malcolm had been waiting for, he wanted to see New York City, and especially Harlem. The musicians, merchant mariners, chauffeurs, and assorted hustlers who passed through Roxbury all spoke about "the Big Apple" as though it was the center of the universe. Even before Boston, growing up in Lansing, he heard Harlem's name all the time. His father once described the massive Garvey parades there with pride and shown the children photographs, and every time Joe Louis defeated a white opponent, the Negro newspapers — the Chicago Defender, the Pittsburgh Courier, the Afro-American — printed front-page images of enormous Harlem crowds cheering from the streets below the Theresa Hotel while the Brown Bomber waved from a balcony above. Broadway's lights, the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theater where the great bands played — Malcolm had been hearing about all of it for years. He simply never had the money to go.

Shorty, who was anxiously expecting his own draft notice, thought it was a fine opportunity. Like hundreds of young Black men across the urban North, Shorty was looking for ways to fail the Army's physical.

[37] Page 89 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

At the hiring office on Dover Street, a clerk ran through the standard questions. When he reached Malcolm's age and Malcolm said twenty-one, the man had a quick look at Malcolm and that was it.

He was promised the first available fourth-cook slot on the Boston-to-New York run. Fourth cook was a polished title for *dishwasher*, which Malcolm knew and did not mind — he just wanted to get to New York. In the meantime, they assigned him to "The Colonial," the line running south to Washington, D.C. The kitchen on that train was a clattering, tight-quarters operation led by a West Indian chef named Duke Vaughn, whose crew moved with the clock while waiters called back orders and five hundred miles' worth of dirty plates came rattling to Malcolm at the sink.

On a layover, he went to see the capital and was stunned by what he found just a few blocks from Capitol Hill.

> "Thousands of Negroes living worse than any I'd ever seen in the poorest sections of Roxbury; in dirt-floor shacks along unspeakably filthy lanes with names like Pig Alley and Goat Alley. I had seen a lot, but never such a dense concentration of stumblebums, pushers, hookers, public crap-shooters, even little kids running around at midnight begging for pennies, half-naked and barefooted. Some of the railroad cooks and waiters had told me to be very careful, because muggings, knifings and robberies went on every night among these Negroes…just a few blocks from the White House." [38]

After a few Washington runs, the real opportunity for Malcolm came, a temporary spot as sandwich man on the "Yankee Clipper," the line that ran between Boston and New York. The cooks brought him up to Harlem in a cab. White Manhattan rolled past outside the windows, and then somewhere around 110th Street, at the upper edge of Central Park, the complexion of the city changed.

They went to a place on Seventh Avenue called Small's Paradise. No Black-owned establishment Malcolm ever saw came close to it. Thirty or forty men sat along a large, circular bar, drinking and talking. What took him by surprise, was not the room's size or polish but something he didn't not expect at all. Wherever Malcolm had been around even ten Black men drinking — in Boston, certainly in Lansing — there was considerable noise. Here, among several dozen, there was only a low murmur of conversation. The bartenders knew what each man drank and poured it without being asked. Customers laid their bills

[38] Page 84 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

on the bar without any show, nodded for a friend's drink to be covered, and the bartenders made change off the money sitting in front of them — all of it smooth, easy, without saying a single word. Nobody was performing for anyone else.

Malcolm didn't realize that was a tiny part of Harlem. He would learn later that night — and in the nights that followed — that Harlem held hundreds of thousands of Black residents who were every bit as loud as people anywhere else. But these men were the older, established operators: the numbers runners and hustlers who had wrapped up the day's business and were gathered in the early evening before the nighttime crowds arrived. The regular working people were still home eating dinner. In that quiet hour, Malcolm sensed something different.

> **"**Their manners seemed natural; they were not putting on any airs. I was awed. Within the first five minutes in Small's, I had left Boston and Roxbury forever." [39]

From Small's, he caught a cab to the Apollo Theater, where Jay McShann's band was on stage. Across 125th Street, at Seventh Avenue, stood the Theresa Hotel, the finest hotel in New York City that would accept Black guests in those years. Up on 126th Street, near the Apollo's backstage entrance, he walked into the bar of the Braddock Hotel, a famous gathering place for Negro celebrities. Along the packed bar, he saw Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Eckstine, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Dinah Washington.

Outside the Savoy, soldiers and sailors gawked along Lenox and Seventh and Eighth Avenues in groups, young and wide-eyed, just as Malcolm was. The neighborhood had already been declared off-limits to white servicemen after a series of assaults and robberies, but white civilians who wanted to come uptown still found their way. Hustlers worked the sidewalks with quick pitches, offering jewelry at a fraction of what they claimed it was worth. Malcolm was still sixteen years old at that .

> **"**In another two years, I could have given them all lessons. But that night, I was mesmerized. This world was where I belonged. On that night I had started on my way to becoming a Harlemite. I was going to become one of the most depraved parasitical hustlers among New York's eight million people—four million of whom work, and the other four million of whom live off them." [40]

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[39] Page 85 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)
[40] Page 87 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## Hey Red

The sandwich man he replaced had little hope of reclaiming the job. Malcolm was all into the work, moving with enthusiasm his way up and down the aisles of the Yankee Clipper, his sales quickly outnumbered all past records. He figured out within days a basic tactic that powered the entire service economy between Black workers and white passengers: put on enough of a show, and people would buy whatever you were selling.

Malcolm took advantage of every layover night in Harlem. He took a room first at the YMCA on 135th Street, less than a block from Small's, then moved to cheaper quarters at Mrs. Fisher's rooming house nearby, where most railroad men stayed. He walked not just the famous avenues but the residential neighborhoods as well — from Sugar Hill up near the Polo Grounds, where well-known entertainers lived, down through block after block of aging tenement buildings where the conditions matched or exceeded the worst of Lansing's West Side and Roxbury's South End. He wandered through rent-raising parties in jammed apartments, where for a dollar you got a plate of food and for fifty cents a drink, and the record player competed with thirty or forty people laughing and dancing and gambling in the heat.

The regulars at Small's and the Braddock began calling him "Red" a natural enough name given his bright red conk, which he now had done at Abbott and Fogey's in Boston, a shop the musicians considered the best on the East Coast. His circle of acquaintances grew to include people like Sonny Greer, Duke Ellington's drummer, and Ray Nance, the violinist known for his wild scat singing. He knew Cootie Williams, and Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, who had no hair at all under his hat and liked to tease Malcolm about conks. He knew Sy Oliver, the arranger who did much of the writing for Tommy Dorsey's band. On the trains, the waiters and cooks started calling him "Sandwich Red".

But the same crew had a running bet that he would not last, sales record or not, because he had become — by his own words — wildly rude to customers. He cursed constantly at passengers and servicemen. The older railroaders who tried to settle him down gave up quickly.

**"**Then I'd come to work, loud and wild and half-high, and I'd stay that way, jamming sandwiches at people until we got to New York. I was really a clown, but my ignorance made me think I was "sharp." [41]

Malcolm had one funny incident on the train that he can never forget:

> **"**I was working down the aisle and a big, beefy, red-faced cracker soldier got up in front of me, so drunk he was weaving, and announced loud enough that everybody in the car heard him, "I'm going to fight you, nigger." I remember the tension. I laughed and told him, "Sure, I'll fight, but you've got too many clothes on." He had on a big Army overcoat. He took that off, and I kept laughing and said he still had on too many. I was able to keep that cracker stripping off clothes until he stood there drunk with nothing on from his pants up, and the whole car was laughing at him, and some other soldiers got him out of the way. I went on. I never would forget that—that I couldn't have whipped that white man as badly with a club as I had with my mind." [42]

The steward on the Yankee Clipper was a white man from Maine named Pappy Cousins, who liked nearly everybody, including Malcolm. He had quietly let several passenger complaints to go unnoticed and asked some of the veteran Negro crew to try settling Malcolm down. It made no difference.

Malcolm didn't change. He stayed in the job until an angry passenger's letter reached the conductor, and with the warnings already piled up, he was let go. But in those wartime years, with jobs going unfilled everywhere, he didn't care. He took some time off and used his accumulated travel privileges to visit his brothers and sisters in Lansing.

None of them could believe how much Malcolm changed, the way he looked, and they way he acted. His oldest brother Wilfred was away at Wilberforce University in Ohio, but Philbert and Hilda were working in town, Reginald — who had always looked up to Malcolm — was big enough now to be preparing for the merchant marine, and the younger children, Yvonne, Wesley, and Robert, were still in school. Malcolm's conk and full zoot-suit costume looked as though he arrived from another planet.

He went to the state hospital in Kalamazoo. The visit hit him hard, especially when he noticed that his mother hardly recognized him. Then he stopped in Mason to see Mrs.

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[41] Page 90 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[42] Page 89 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Swerlin, who had looked after him at the detention home. When she opened her front door and saw the sharkskin zoot suit, the four-inch-brimmed pearl-gray hat, and the conked fire-red hair underneath it, she was shocked and hesitant to invite Malcolm in. The conversation was uncomfortable for both and too short. He also visited Shorty's mother, an older woman who was happy to hear that her son was doing well.

### Old Timers

Back in New York, Malcolm managed to find some work with the Seaboard Line, working the "Silver Meteor" down to St. Petersburg and Miami — renting pillows, keeping coaches clean, and tending to passengers. It lasted only a few runs. A confrontation with a white assistant conductor in Florida led to losing his job, and when he returned to New York, they told him to find other work.

That same afternoon, he walked into Small's Paradise and one of the bartenders pulled him aside. A waiter was about to leave for the Army, and if Malcolm was willing to give up the railroad for good, the position might be his.

The bar was owned by Ed Small. He ran the bar alongside his brother Charlie, and the two of them were among the most widely respected figures in Harlem. Charlie was the one Malcolm spoke with in the back office. The Smalls knew he was a railroad man, which was the strongest recommendation a potential waiter could carry, and Charlie had watched Malcolm sit quietly at the bar on many evenings. Malcolm told him, honestly at that point, that he had never been in trouble with the police. Charlie laid out the house rules — no lateness, no laziness, no stealing, no hustling off customers, and nothing involving men in uniform — and hired him. It was 1942 when Malcolm had just turned seventeen.

With Small's sitting at the center of nearly everything in Harlem, the waiter's job put Malcolm exactly where he wanted to be. Charlie Small had no reason to worry about punctuality: Malcolm arrived an hour early every shift. The morning waiter he replaced, who considered the daytime the slowest and least profitable, stayed around through that extra hour teaching Malcolm the small things that could make a big difference — courtesies and tactics that would win over the cooks and bartenders, both of whom had the power to make a waiter's life easy or miserable. Within a week, Malcolm had made himself indispensable to both. The customers who recognized him from his nights at the bar were pleased to see a familiar face in the waiter's jacket, and he served them well.

But it was the conversations — at the bar during quite times, over meals with customers who felt like talking, in long exchanges with the true old-timers who had been in Harlem since the earliest days — that became his real education.

One of the biggest surprises for Malcolm was that Harlem had not always been a Black community. It had started as a Dutch settlement, the old-timers told him, and then successive waves of European immigrants had arrived and pushed each preceding group further on: the Germans displaced the Dutch, the Irish displaced the Germans, the Italians took over from the Irish, and Jewish immigrants displaced the Italians. Each group, upon the arrival of the next, packed up and moved. Now, the old-timers said, the descendants of all those immigrants were running from the descendants of the Black people who had helped unload their ancestors' ships in the first place.

Black people had been in New York since 1683, before any of those European groups, and been pushed from ghetto to ghetto across the lower half of the island — from the Wall Street area to Greenwich Village to the blocks around Pennsylvania Station to 52nd Street, which earned its famous Swing Street name from the years that Black musicians played there. Then, around 1910, a Black real estate man placed a few families in an apartment building in what was then a Jewish section of Harlem. The Jewish tenants left the building, then the block, and more Black families moved in until, within a few years, the neighborhood had transformed entirely.

By the early twenties, Harlem became the center of Black cultural life in America. White audiences poured uptown every night, and the music and entertainment industry grew around them. The stock market crash of 1929 brought that golden era to a close, but Small's had been part of all of it, and the men who drank there in the early forties still carried the memories.

Malcolm listened to everything. Day after day, he absorbed the stories, the histories, and the dynamics of the hustling life. Numbers, confidence games, theft of every kind: the older men described their trades with a depth of long practice. Malcolm was being schooled by professionals, and he soaked up every word.

## The Underworld of Harlem

**"**Every day in Small's Paradise Bar was fascinating to me. And from a Harlem point of view, I couldn't have been in a more educational situation.**"**[43]

Small's Paradise had been Malcolm's real school of Harlem. Regular veteran hustlers liked Malcolm and began to school him. He absorbed the first principle in the hustling society: trust nobody outside your closest circle and choose even that circle with care.

But in early 1943, Malcolm broke the one rule every bar in wartime Harlem lived by — never get involved in anything that could be read as hustling off servicemen. A Black soldier sat alone at one of his tables one afternoon, looking lost and freshly up from the Deep South. On impulse, Malcolm offered him one of the services in the hustling world. The soldier turned out to be a military spy.

Malcolm sensed the mistake immediately. He walked straight into Charlie Small's office and explained what happened. Charlie wished he hadn't done it, and Malcolm knew that one little mistake was enough to get him out.

When the detectives arrived, Malcolm was already waiting, two things worked in his favor: he had never given the police any trouble, and he had refused the spy's tip. They let him off, but worse than losing the job was the verdict that came with it — he was barred from Small's entirely. The surveillance that would follow him now was a risk the Small brothers could not carry.

It was Sammy - an old friend - who helped him. He put the word out for Malcolm to come to his apartment, sat him down, and they talked through what came next. There were few options for a young Black man with no job, no references, and detectives who now knew his face. Sammy staked a small sum and pointed him the only economy that asked no questions: the drugs business.

Malcolm didn't hesitate, and within a single night he repaid Sammy and turned a profit. Within weeks he was earning more in a day than he had ever made in a week. He was seventeen, and for the first time in his life he felt genuinely free. But freedom built on hustling did not last long.

The narcotics squad found him quickly. Detectives tailed him, stopped him on the street occasionally, and started to search his room when he was away. He started moving

[43] Page 97 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

every few nights, told only Sammy where he slept, and began carrying a small pistol. Before long, he was on the squad's special watch list. The pressure pushed away his customers and cornered him into rougher parts of Harlem where he lost what little ground he had.

Somewhere in those months, people around Harlem started to call him Detroit Red. Whenever people asked where he was from, he would say Detroit — as nobody in New York had heard of Lansing.

His draft notice arrived in late 1943. He had about ten days, he put on the most outrageous zoot suit he owned, frizzed his hair into a wild reddish bush, and reported for induction skipping through the door and talking nonstop. He played a mental role through every step — the intake room full of stunned inductees, the medical examiners who could barely keep straight faces, and finally the Army psychiatrist's office.

A 4-F card arrived in the mail shortly after. The Army never contacted him again. He was eighteen years old, free of the draft, and falling deeper into the darkness of Harlem's underworld.

### The Shadow of Death

**"**Right now, in every big city ghetto, tens of thousands of yesterday's and today's school drop-outs are keeping body and soul together by some form of hustling in the same way I did. And they inevitably move into more and more, worse and worse, illegality and immorality." [44]

It didn't take long until Malcolm slipped into a more dangerous zone. He pulled his first robberies — small jobs, always in nearby towns, never in Harlem itself. He began using hard drugs before each job to steady his nerves, and between jobs he stayed high to avoid thinking about what he was becoming. Worse, he carried a pistol everywhere.

His brother Reginald's ship docked in New York again, and this time Malcolm asked him to stay. He rented a small apartment on 147th Street — partly, he realized, so that Reginald would have somewhere to call home. He set Reginald up with a harmless hustle: buying cheap, imperfect merchandise from a manufacturers' outlet downtown and reselling it in Harlem barbershops and bars, where customers assumed the goods were stolen and happily paid inflated prices for what was, in fact, perfectly legal inventory.

[44] Page 120 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Reginald carried both a peddler's license and the manufacturer's receipts in his pocket. Malcolm wanted something safer for his brother than the life he was living himself.

Harlem's racial tension had been building for years. The Savoy Ballroom had been shut down by City Hall. Merchants on 125th Street still refused to hire Black workers even as they took Black customers' money. Then, in the summer of 1943, a rumor tore through the neighborhood: white police officers had shot a Black soldier at the Braddock Hotel.

Malcolm was walking down St. Nicholas Avenue when he saw crowds running north from 125th Street, some loaded down with merchandise from smashed storefronts. Within an hour, it seemed like every police officer in New York was in Harlem. The mayor and the NAACP's Walter White rode through the streets in a fire car, pleading over a loudspeaker for people to go home.

After the riot, what remained of Harlem's economy tightened even further. The stream of white visitors who had sustained the nightlife dried up almost completely.

He moved from one hustle to the next — numbers running, bootlegging, odd jobs for people whose business he knew better than to ask about. For a time, he worked with a man named Hymie, transporting bootleg liquor to bars across the city. Hymie liked Malcolm and paid him well, sometimes two or three hundred dollars a week. Then one day Hymie simply did not show up. Malcolm heard later that he had been killed — one more casualty of the same criminal machinery that employed them both.

Meanwhile, his friendship with Sammy fell apart. On a job together, Sammy had been grazed by a bullet. In the aftermath, a confrontation between them escalated until Sammy reached for his gun. Malcolm managed to escape, and the relationship with Sammy was never the same.

By late 1945, Malcolm's hustling life was collapsing. He was using more drugs than ever — reefers by the ounce, cocaine, occasionally opium. His body was wearing down, racked by constant colds. Italian racketeers cornered him in a phone booth one evening over a crime he had nothing to do with; only a policeman walking through the front door at that exact moment saved his life. And now West Indian Archie, one of Harlem's most feared men, was looking for him.

## The Inevitable

**"**Sometimes, recalling all of this, I don't know, to tell the truth, how I am alive to tell it today. They say God takes care of fools and babies. I've so often thought that Allah was watching over me. Through all of this time of my life, I really was dead—mentally dead. I just didn't know that I was."[45]

What Malcolm feared most did happen. West Indian Archie found him at Sammy's place, arguing that Malcolm owed him three hundred dollars. Archie said the number Malcolm had collected was not the one he played. Malcolm insisted he had played the right number.

But the truth was, he had been high so often and for so long that he could no longer be certain. The money itself was not the issue. What mattered, in the code of Harlem's streets, was that no one wanted to be looked at like a fool, and neither man could afford to back down. Losing face was an invitation for every other predator to come after you. Archie had put the dispute on the wire — Harlem's word-of-mouth network — which meant everyone was watching.

That night, Malcolm went downtown with a friend. When they came back uptown afterward, Malcolm sat at a bar on 147th Street with his back to the door — a mistake he would never repeat. West Indian Archie walked in, armed and high, and stood over him in front of the entire room.

Then Archie threatened Malcolm, telling him that he was sixty years old, he had already been to prison, his life was behind him, but Malcolm was young — and even if he won this fight, the only road left for him would be a life in prison. Archie's friends moved in and guided him toward the back of the bar. Malcolm stood up, left money on the counter, walked outside, and waited for five minutes, luckily. Archie did not follow.

At this stage, Malcolm was on the run all the time. West Indian Archie was still looking for him. Italian racketeers from the weeks before still suspected him of a robbery he had not committed. And now the police, hearing through the wire that Malcolm was armed and caught in a dispute, came looking for him too. A patrolman stopped him on the sidewalk, searched him, found nothing, and offered a piece of quiet advice: leave town.

For Malcolm, everything was falling apart. For four years he had stayed out of jail, dodging detectives and navigating the codes of the street by instinct and nerve. But the

[45] Page 138 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

drugs had destroyed him. He was sick constantly, unable to think straight. He was twenty years old and trapped by the life he had built around himself.

Malcolm was hiding at Sammy's place, feeling lost, when suddenly there was a car horn. He turned around, nearly reaching for his gun before he recognized the face behind the wheel. It was Shorty — his oldest friend, all the way from Boston. Sammy had called him. He picked up the phone and told Shorty to come get his homeboy before it was too late.

Shorty finished his band's gig that night, borrowed his piano player's car, and driven straight through without sleeping. Malcolm seized the opportunity. He went upstairs, packed what little he cared to keep, stuffed it in the trunk, got in, and they drove to Boston.

In Boston, Malcolm was barely recognizable. Ella was stunned by what her brother had become. Even Shorty, who had first introduced him to the nightlife years earlier, was unsettled by the person in front of him — someone who carried a gun all the time, and whose vocabulary had shrunk to a few hundred words of slang.

For the first weeks he mostly slept, his body shutting down after years of running on drugs and adrenaline. Drugs were the only thing that pushed away the thought he could not otherwise escape: he was twenty years old and had no life, he had nothing.

He needed money. After winning a large pot in a poker game, he began planning something more ambitious. He assembled a small burglary crew: himself, Shorty, and a young man named Rudy who worked as a waiter at exclusive parties and knew which homes held valuables worth stealing. Sophia, an old friend, and her younger sister would scout locations, posing as saleswomen or survey-takers to get inside wealthy homes and map the layouts.

The operation ran smoothly for a time. They worked at night, targeted homes in wealthy neighborhoods, and fenced the stolen goods through a contact who paid in cash. Malcolm would later reflect that every criminal expects the day to come — and uses whatever he can to keep that knowledge out of his mind.

What brought it down was a stolen watch. Malcolm had kept an expensive one for himself and taken it to a jeweler to replace the crystal. The owner had already reported it missing and described the exact repair it needed. Every jeweler in Boston was alerted.

When Malcolm came to pick it up, a detective was waiting. Malcolm had a gun. For one moment, with the detective's back briefly turned, he could have reached for it, but he did not. He raised his hand and offered the gun instead. Two more detectives stepped out

from where they had been hidden, weapons drawn. One wrong move and he would have been dead. That same morning, another man went to the apartment with a gun looking for Malcolm. Had the arrest come even an hour later, the outcome might have been very different.

The police found the apartment full of evidence — furs, jewelry, burglary tools, and Malcolm's collection of firearms. Sophia and her sister were arrested as well. Shorty was pulled off the bandstand that night. Rudy alone managed to disappear and was never caught.

At the hearing, Malcolm noticed something. Nobody seemed interested in the robberies. The questions, the outrage from social workers and court-appointed lawyers — all of it circled around one thing: these were white women, and these were Black men. The girls received low bail. Malcolm and Shorty had their set at ten thousand dollars each, an amount neither could come close to raising. A typical first-offense burglary sentence in Massachusetts was about two years. Malcolm and Shorty would receive far more than that.

> **"**I want to say before I go on that I have never previously told anyone my sordid past in detail. I haven't done it now to sound as though I might be proud of how bad, how evil, I was. But people are always speculating—why am I as I am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth, must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient. Today, when everything that I do has an urgency, I would not spend one hour in the preparation of a book which had the ambition to perhaps titillate some readers. But I am spending many hours because the full story is the best way that I know to have it seen, and understood, that I had sunk to the very bottom of the American white man's society when—soon now, in prison—I found Allah and the religion of Islam and it completely transformed my life.**"** [46]

[46] Page 164 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Part 3 | Malcolm X

## Chapter 5

### Concurrently

February 1946, Malcolm stood before a judge in Middlesex County Court for fourteen criminal charges. Shorty stood beside him, and behind them sat Shorty's mother, Ella, and Reginald — the mother weeping and bowing her head in prayer, the siblings watching in silence.

Shorty was called up first. The judge began reading out the counts one by one — eight to ten years on the first, eight to ten on the second, eight to ten on the third — and when at last he announced that the sentences would run concurrently, Shorty, who had never heard the word "concurrently", assumed he had just been given a total of over a hundred years. He cried out, his legs buckled, and the bailiffs had to catch him before he hit the floor. In those few seconds, Malcolm would later say, Shorty swung from a praying man to an atheist.

Malcolm received eight to ten years. The two women who had been part of the burglary ring were sentenced to one to five years at the Women's Reformatory in Framingham, Massachusetts. Guards handcuffed Shorty and Malcolm and drove them to Charlestown State Prison.

### Angry

**"**Behind bars, a man never reforms. He will never forget. He never will get completely over the memory of the bars. After he gets out, his mind tries to erase the experience, but he can't.**"**[47]

The prison had been built in 1805, during the Napoleonic era, and its design borrowed from the Bastille. There was no running water in the cells. Each one was so narrow that a man lying on his cot could stretch out his arms and press both walls at once. A covered bucket served as a toilet. Malcolm, suddenly cut off from drugs, made him angry all the time.

[47] Page 166 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He cursed the prison psychologist who came to interview him, and even the chaplain who came after that. When his brother Philbert wrote from Detroit to say that his church congregation was praying for Malcolm's soul, Malcolm scrawled back a reply so hostile that years later he would be ashamed to recall it. When Ella came to visit and saw him standing there in faded dungarees stamped with his inmate number, she caught herself for a moment, then tried to smile. Neither of them could find much to say, and before long Malcolm wished she had not come at all.

He discovered that nutmeg could get you high. Kitchen workers sold it in penny matchboxes to inmates who could pay in money or cigarettes, and a matchbox stirred into a glass of cold water produced a buzz strong enough to pass for something harder. With money Ella sent, Malcolm was eventually able to buy reefers and pills from the guards themselves, who supplemented their wages by smuggling contraband to prisoners. The first year or so at Charlestown, Malcolm would later say, ran together in his memory as a single blur — nutmeg and drugs, cursing guards and throwing things from his cell, dropping his tray in the dining hall, refusing to answer when they called his number.

What he wanted most was solitary confinement, which most inmates dreaded. Alone in isolation, he would pace for hours, swearing aloud at the Bible and at God. But there were legal limits on how long a man could be kept in solitary, and eventually they always brought him back. The other inmates on the cellblock began to call him *Satan*.

### Bimbi's Wisdoms

In 1947, still at Charlestown, Malcolm met the first person inside prison who changed the way he thought about what it meant to be a man. The inmate "Bimbi" — an older, light-complexioned man with freckles, roughly Malcolm's height, who had spent years cycling through prisons on burglary charges. They worked in the license plate shop together, Bimbi running the machine that stamped the numbers and Malcolm stationed along the conveyor belt where the plates were painted.

What set Bimbi apart was the way he spoke. Almost daily, a dozen or more inmates gathered around to listen to him on whatever subject caught his attention — history, human behavior, philosophy, the origins of words. He could take an obscure topic and hold an entire room. White prisoners who would ordinarily never have paid attention to a Black inmate's opinions drifted over to hear him. Even the guards came close. When he talked about the history of Concord, Massachusetts — where Malcolm would later be

transferred — he sounded like someone the chamber of commerce hired. Malcolm never heard of Thoreau until Bimbi spoke about him.

What struck Malcolm most was that Bimbi commanded total respect without raising his voice, making threats, or using a single foul word.

> "What fascinated me with him most of all was that he was the first man I had ever seen command total respect…with his words."[48]

Bimbi rarely said much to Malcolm directly, but Malcolm could tell the older man liked him. What drove Malcolm to seek his friendship was hearing Bimbi discuss religion. Malcolm considered himself not merely an atheist but something beyond atheism — he was Satan, after all. Yet when he listened to Bimbi lay out the case against faith in a calm, structured way, Malcolm's own raging attacks on the Bible and on God sounded crude and childish by comparison. The vicious cursing stopped.

Then one day, without any preamble, Bimbi told Malcolm flatly that he had brains, if he would bother to use them, and he should sign up for the prison's correspondence courses and start spending time in the library. Malcolm had not thought seriously about studying anything since the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan, and the years on the streets erased whatever grammar and vocabulary he had learned.

Malcolm, however, enrolled in a correspondence course in English. When lists of available library books made the rounds from cell to cell, he began requesting titles. Slowly the basics of grammar came back to him, and after about a year he could compose a decent, meaningful letter. Around the same time, inspired by hearing Bimbi trace words back to their Latin roots, he quietly signed up for a correspondence course in Latin as well.

Sometime in 1948, after Malcolm was transferred to Concord Prison, a letter arrived from his brother Philbert, who was forever joining one organization or another. This time Philbert wrote that he had discovered what he called the natural religion for the Black man — called the Nation of Islam — and urged Malcolm to pray to Allah for deliverance. Malcolm wrote back a reply that was, if anything, nastier than his earlier response to Philbert's Christian prayers.

Not long afterward, a letter came from his younger brother Reginald. Malcolm had no reason to connect the two letters, though he knew Reginald spent time in Detroit with

[48] Page 168 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Wilfred, Hilda, and Philbert. Reginald's letter was chatty and familiar, but tucked inside a single instruction:

> **"**Malcolm, don't eat any more pork, and don't smoke any more cigarettes. I'll show you how to get out of prison.**"**[49]

Malcolm's mind went first to the hustling life. He was trying to figure out what kind of plan Reginald had in mind — maybe something psychological, like the act Malcolm had once pulled on the New York draft board. Could he go without pork and cigarettes for a while, then claim some medical condition that might lead to his release? The words "get out of prison" sat with him day and night. He wanted badly to consult Bimbi, but some deep instinct told him to keep this to himself.

Giving up cigarettes turned out to be manageable; his stretches in solitary without them had already trained him. Whatever this chance was, he was not going to waste it. He finished the last pack he had and never smoked another cigarette for the rest of his life.

A few days later, pork was served for lunch. Malcolm sat down at the long table without giving it a thought — the routine was to sit, grab, eat, stand, and file out. When the meat platter reached him, he did not even know what kind of meat it was, and then he remembered Reginald's words. He paused with the platter in midair, then handed it to the man next to him. The man stopped, and looked at Malcolm with surprise when he heard *"I don't eat pork."*

## Norfolk

While Malcolm's brothers and sisters kept sending him letters, his sister Ella had another plan. She was trying to have Malcolm transferred to the Norfolk Prison Colony in Massachusetts, an experimental rehabilitation facility that inmates at other prisons talked about as almost too good to be real — a place you could supposedly get into if you had the right connections. Ella's efforts succeeded in late 1948.

Norfolk was a different world. The cells had flushing toilets. There were no bars on the windows, only walls enclosing the compound, and within those walls inmates moved with freedom that would have been unthinkable at Charlestown. The air was clean; the facility located outside the city. Twenty-four residential units each housed about fifty men,

[49] Page 169 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

bringing the total population to roughly twelve hundred, and each inmate had his own room. About fifteen percent of the population was Black, distributed in small groups across the housing units.

The culture leaned toward education rather than the malice and corruption that defined most prisons Malcolm had known. Instructors from Harvard, Boston University, and other nearby schools came in to teach rehabilitation courses. Visiting rules allowed guests nearly every day for up to two hours, and you could sit beside your visitor rather than across a barrier. Group discussions and organized debates were common, and a sizable share of the inmates pursued what passed, in prison, for intellectual life.

The library was the Colony's finest feature. A wealthy man named Parkhurst had donated his personal collection, and his interests had run toward history and religion. Thousands of volumes filled the shelves, and boxes and crates of more books sat in storage for lack of space. Inmates could enter the library with permission, walk the aisles, and pull books down themselves — some of the volumes were very old and likely quite rare. Malcolm read whatever he could find at first, then gradually learned to read with a purpose.

Malcolm didn't hear from Reginald for some time after arriving at Norfolk, though he followed the words of Reginald — no cigarettes, no pork. When a letter finally came from Reginald, Malcolm couldn't wait to see his brother — and to hear the plan Reginald was going to lay out.

When Reginald arrived, Malcolm was desperate for the answer to the riddle of pork and cigarettes, but Reginald talked casually about the family, about what was happening in Detroit, about Harlem. Malcolm was never the type to push someone before they were ready to talk, and he recognized the signs that told him something important was being prepared.

Reginald started to talk about God, and that his real name was Allah. Malcolm recognized the name from Philbert's earlier letter — his first hint that the two letters might be connected. Reginald went on: God possessed three hundred and sixty degrees of knowledge, which represented the total sum of everything that could be known, while the devil possessed only thirty-three degrees, called Masonry, and used those thirty-three degrees to rule over others. He said that this God had come to America and made himself known to a Black man named Elijah, and that he told Elijah the devil's time was nearly finished.

Then Reginald said the devil was a man. When Malcolm asked what he meant, Reginald glanced toward a group of white inmates and their visitors sitting across the room. *"Them," he said. "The white man is the devil."*

After Reginald left, Malcolm sat with what he had been told for a long time. He could not make sense of it.

Every white person he had ever known began to pass through his mind. The state welfare workers who had been a constant presence in his family's home after other white people — people Malcolm never knew — killed his father. The officials who told his mother she was crazy, saying it to her face and in front of her children, until she was finally taken away to the hospital in Kalamazoo. The judge split the family apart and scattered the children. The Swerlins and the other white families around Mason. The classmates and the teachers — including the one who told him in the eighth grade to think about carpentry instead of law, because ambition like that was unrealistic for a Negro. All of them passed through his mind, one after another, back to the beginning of his life.

When Reginald returned a few days later, he could read from Malcolm's manner that his words had landed. For two solid hours he talked about the history of white oppression and what he described as centuries of brainwashing inflicted on Black people. When he left, Malcolm found himself turning over ideas he had never seriously considered before — that white dominance over the non-white world was weakening, that the darker nations were beginning to reclaim a position they had held in ancient times, and that a civilization built on exploitation was approaching its end.

> **"**You don't even know who you are," Reginald had said. "You don't even know, the white devil has hidden it from you, that you are a race of people of ancient civilizations, and riches in gold and kings. You don't even know your true family name, you wouldn't recognize your true language if you heard it. You have been cut off by the devil white man from all true knowledge of your own kind. You have been a victim of the evil of the devil white man ever since he murdered and raped and stole you from your native land in the seeds of your forefathers…."[50]

[50] Page 163 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## Yacub's History

Letters began arriving almost daily — from Wilfred and his wife Bertha in Detroit, from Philbert, from Hilda. All of them became followers of the man they called Mr. Elijah Muhammad, whom they described as a small, gentle Black man born on a farm in Georgia. He moved with his family to Detroit, where he had met a man named W. D. Fard, whom he believed to be God in person. Fard, according to Mr. Muhammad, had entrusted him with a divine message for Black people in America, whom he called the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in the wilderness of North America. All of Malcolm's siblings urged him to accept Mr. Muhammad's teachings.

Malcolm's brothers and sisters chose Reginald to make the approach because he was the most recent convert, the one who knew Malcolm's street mind best and would understand how to reach him. Reginald explained that the rules — no pork, no cigarettes, no narcotics, no alcohol — were standards practiced by all of Mr. Muhammad's followers.

Then Hilda came to visit. She told Malcolm that when Mr. Muhammad traveled to Detroit, he stayed as a guest at Wilfred's home on McKay Street, and that he had only recently been released from the federal prison at Milan, Michigan, where he served five years for refusing the draft. Mr. Muhammad was based in Chicago, she said, where he was organizing his Temple Number Two, while his original temple in Detroit — Temple Number One — had fallen apart during his years in prison and needed rebuilding. Hilda urged Malcolm to write to him directly.

She asked Malcolm if he wanted to hear how, according to Mr. Muhammad's teachings, the white race had come into existence. What she told him was a narrative that Mr. Muhammad's followers called Yacub's History — a creation story at the center of what they believed. In its essentials, the teaching held that the original human beings were Black, that they had built the earliest civilizations, and that a rebellious scientist named Yacub, born thousands of years ago, had engineered a progressively lighter-skinned race through generations of selective breeding on an island. The process was said to have taken six hundred years, moving through stages before producing the white race, which was then driven into the caves of Europe, where it lived in savagery until the prophet Moses was sent to civilize them and lead them out. The doctrine taught that this engineered race had been given six thousand years to rule the earth, and that those years were now nearing their end.

Malcolm would later acknowledge that such fabricated stories infuriated mainstream Muslims in the East.

> **"**I was to learn later that Elijah Muhammad's tales, like this one of "Yacub," infuriated the Muslims of the East. While at Mecca, I reminded them that it was their fault, since they themselves hadn't done enough to make real Islam known in the West. Their silence left a vacuum into which any religious faker could step and mislead our people.**"**[51]

In the days that followed, he couldn't stop thinking. He sat in his room and stared at the walls. At meals he barely ate, drinking only water, until he had nearly starved himself.

Malcolm was wrestling with his past. It was as though that entire life had simply detached from him and melted away. He would later compare the experience, carefully, to what the apostle Paul described on the road to Damascus — being struck so completely by an idea that a man is knocked off the course of his whole life. A man who did not feel he needed saving, Malcolm reasoned, could not be saved.

He was not yet ready to embrace everything at once — what it meant to be a Black man in America, what it meant that everything he had been taught about his own identity might, according to this teaching, be a lie. That confrontation was still ahead of him. But years later, looking back on those days at Norfolk, he said:

> **"**I was going through the hardest thing, also the greatest thing, for any human being to do; to accept that which is already within you, and around you.**"**[52]

[51] Page 182 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[52] Page 178 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Chapter 6

## Chains of Arrogance

Sitting in his cell at the Norfolk Prison Colony, Malcolm scratched out line after line on a single sheet of paper addressed to Elijah Muhammad, starting over when the words came out crooked or misspelled. His handwriting was barely readable, let alone his grammar. What he managed to say, as clearly as he could, was that his brothers and sisters had told him about Mr. Muhammad's teachings.

Mr. Muhammad's reply came typed. Seeing that signature at the bottom of the page — the Messenger of Allah — touched Malcolm's heart. Mr. Muhammad welcomed him into what he called the true knowledge and then reminded him: the Black man behind bars, he wrote, stood as a symbol of what white society had done to Black people, depriving them of education and decent work, holding them in ignorance and poverty, and then locking them up for the desperation that followed. He told Malcolm to stay strong. Folded inside the envelope was a five-dollar bill — a gesture Mr. Muhammad extended to prison inmates across the country who wrote to him.

Malcolm's family kept writing too, each letter urging him to turn to Allah and pray to the East. And it was prayer that became the hardest test he had ever faced in his life. Accepting Mr. Muhammad's teachings had been a matter of the mind. But getting down on his knees was something else. Before this, the only time Malcolm's knees had ever bent was to pick a lock. He would force himself down and a wave of shame would push him right back up. He tried again and the same thing happened. For a full week he fought this battle with himself, lowering his body to the floor and then being driven back up by the weight of everything he had been. When he finally managed to stay down, he did not know what to say to Allah.

> "For evil to bend its knees, admitting its guilt, to implore the forgiveness of God, is the hardest thing in the world. It's easy for me to see and to say that

now. But then, when I was the personification of evil, I was going through it."[53]

From that point on, Malcolm became something close to a hermit at the Norfolk Prison Colony, and he had never been busier in his life. Despite the struggle, every day he wrote at least one letter to Mr. Muhammad, and at least one more to one of his brothers or sisters.

### Chains of Ignorance

Out on the streets, Malcolm used to be the most articulate hustler — when he talked, people listened. But trying to put those same thoughts on paper, he discovered he was not just ignorant, he could not spell, or build a proper sentence, or even keep his handwriting in a straight line.

The frustration had roots going back to the Charlestown Prison, where a fellow inmate named Bimbi had first made Malcolm realize what a well-educated man could do in conversation. Bimbi took charge of any discussion he walked into, and Malcolm tried to follow his example by picking up books, but nearly every page was full of words he could not recognize, terms that didn't make sense to him.

The solution he arrived at was the dictionary. He would teach himself words, one at a time. He requested one from the prison school along with some tablets and pencils, and for two days he did nothing but skim through it, overwhelmed by how many words there were and unsure where to begin. At last, simply to get himself moving, he picked up his pencil and started copying. In slow, ragged handwriting he copied everything printed on the first page of that dictionary — every word, every definition, every punctuation mark. It took him a full day. That night he read everything he had written, out loud, repeatedly.

When he woke up the next day those words were still running through his mind, and he felt a pride unlike anything he had known — not just that he had written so much at one sitting, but that he had put down words he never knew existed. With a little effort, he found he could recall what many of them meant. One word, however, caught Malcolm's attention: *Aardvark*. The dictionary had a small picture of it beside the entry — a burrowing African animal with long ears and a long tail that fed on termites.

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[53] Page 184 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

With every new page he copied, he saw people, places and pieces of history he had never heard of. The dictionary, he realized, was like a miniature encyclopedia. By the time he finished the A section, he filled an entire tablet, and he moved on into the B's. Eventually he would copy the entire dictionary, and his speed was increasing with practice. Between the tablets and his daily correspondence, Malcolm estimated that he wrote a million words during his remaining time in prison.

And as his vocabulary expanded, so did his capacity to express himself. For the first time he could pick up a book, read it, and understand what it said. From that moment on, every free hour went to reading. If he was not in the library, he was in his bunk with a book, and months went by, he almost forgot that he was in prison.

> "Between Mr. Muhammad's teachings, my correspondence, my visitors—usually Ella and Reginald—and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life." [54]

The Norfolk Prison Colony's library was in the school building, where instructors from Harvard and Boston University taught classes, and inmates held weekly debates. The shelves covered just about every general subject, and in crates and boxes stacked in the back sat thousands more — the private collection of a man named Parkhurst, who had willed his library to the prison. The volumes were old, their covers faded and their bindings cracked, heavy on history and religion. Any college library would have been fortunate to have them.

Malcolm read more in his cell than in the library itself. Inmates who showed an intense interest in books were allowed to check out more than the normal limit, and Malcolm took full advantage. The trouble came every night at ten, when the lights went out and always seemed to catch him in the middle of something. But just outside his door, there was a corridor light that allowed Malcolm to read for long hours at night. Every hour the night guard walked past, and each time Malcolm heard the footsteps he would jump into his bed. The moment the guard moved on, he was back on the floor. This routine went on until three or four in the morning.

He read so much by that dim corridor light that by the time he left Norfolk, he needed glasses. He walked out with astigmatism and the first pair of eyeglasses he would wear for

[54] Page 187 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

the rest of his life. Years later, people who heard him speak or read something he had written assumed he had been educated well beyond eighth grade. That impression, Malcolm said, was due to his prison studies. He believed no college could have given him what prison did. A campus had too many distractions. Where else but behind bars could a man cure his own ignorance by studying fifteen hours a day?

## Read

Mr. Muhammad's teachings stressed that history itself had been "whitened" — when white men wrote history books, the Black man simply been left out. Malcolm thought back to his seventh grade in Mason, Michigan, where Black American history received exactly one paragraph in the textbook and the teacher drew laughs by mocking the size of Black people's feet.

Once Malcolm heard about what Mr. Muhammad called the glorious history of the Black man, he went hunting through the prison library for everything he could find. The first books that made a deep impression were a set called Wonders of the World, filled with photographs of archaeological discoveries and statues that depicted non-European peoples. He found Will Durant's Story of Civilization and H. G. Wells' Outline of History. W. E. B. Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk gave him a glimpse of Black life before America. Carter G. Woodson's Negro History revealed the existence of great African empires that flourished long before the slave trade. J. A. Rogers' three volumes told him about the mixing of peoples across centuries, about Aesop as a Black man who told fables, about Egypt's pharaohs and the great Coptic Christian empires, about Ethiopia as the oldest continuous Black civilization on earth.

Then he reached the history of slavery, which was too emotional for him. The subject would later become one of the central themes of his preaching. He read Frederick Olmsted's accounts of what enslaved people endured after they were brought to American soil. He read the writings of Fanny Kemble, a British woman who had married a Southern slaveholder and described the degradation she saw firsthand. He read Uncle Tom's Cabin — the only novel, he would say later, that he ever read once he began serious reading. In the Parkhurst collection he found bound pamphlets from the Abolitionist Anti-Slavery Society of New England, their pages full of illustrations that showed the whippings, and the family separations.

Malcolm traced the record of European colonialism across the globe — the British plunder of India, where by 1759 the East India Company had extended its control over much of the subcontinent through promises and manipulation, and where the Indian mutiny of 1857 was met with a brutality that Malcolm found almost beyond belief. He read about the more than one hundred million Africans killed or enslaved during the slave trade, and about the European powers who afterward carved the African continent into colonies. He followed the history of China — the millions of pounds of opium the British had pushed into the country, the Opium Wars that followed when China tried to resist, the treaties that forced Chinese ports open and fixed tariffs so low that cheap British goods destroyed China's own industry, and the Boxer Rebellion of 1901, after which the Chinese were driven from the best areas of their own capital and foreign signs went up reading "Chinese and dogs not allowed." Book after book confirmed the same pattern, and Malcolm read Herodotus, the accounts of Gandhi's struggle against British rule in India, and histories of nations across the world.

He moved into philosophy — Socrates, who had traveled to Egypt and whom some sources said had studied with the wise men of the East; Schopenhauer, Kant, and Nietzsche, whom Malcolm read but did not respect because they seemed to spend most of their time arguing about things he considered unimportant.

The teachings did more than reshape Malcolm's view of the world. They reversed how he felt about his own people. He admitted later, with shame, that before he learned about Mr. Muhammad's message, he preferred being around white people and had disliked the way Black inmates grouped together. Once that changed, he started recruiting for Mr. Muhammad.

It required great care. His brother Reginald had warned him that the truth had to be delivered in small pieces — a man hearing about Black history and Black civilization for the first time might not believe it, or might even be repelled. So Malcolm would begin by telling Black inmates about the empires that had existed in Africa long before the slave trade, things none of them had ever heard. He would read from books written by white authors, because some of the men would not believe it otherwise, and explain that while certain white scholars had always known the truth, it had been deliberately kept hidden. He watched each man carefully. When someone seemed ready — and Malcolm could tell — he would take him aside and deliver Mr. Muhammad's key message.

It was the prison debates, though, that sparked Malcolm's talent. The Norfolk Prison Colony held weekly debates in the school building.

> "Standing up and speaking before an audience was a thing that throughout my previous life never would have crossed my mind. Out there in the streets, hustling, pushing dope, and robbing, I could have had the dreams from a pound of hashish and I'd never have dreamed anything so wild as that one day I would speak in coliseums and arenas, at the greatest American universities, and on radio and television programs, not to mention speaking all over Egypt and Africa and in England."[55]

## Reginald

When his brother Reginald came to visit, Malcolm would share every new piece of evidence he had found — the books, the connections, the way the history lined up with what Mr. Muhammad taught. He had been reading Milton's Paradise Lost in the Harvard Classics and had developed an interpretation that excited him: the devil, cast out of paradise and struggling to return, used the forces of Europe — the Popes, Charlemagne, the Crusaders — as his instruments. Milton and Mr. Muhammad, Malcolm believed, were telling the same story.

And then Reginald said something Malcolm did not expect. It was different, the tone of his voice and the look on his face. He was speaking against Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm was stunned. His own blood brother, the one who first introduced him to the teachings, the person he trusted and respected above nearly anyone, was questioning the man who had changed Malcolm's entire world. He learned later that Reginald was suspended from the Nation of Islam for violating its moral code.

That night Malcolm was in a torment. He wrote to Mr. Muhammad trying to defend Reginald, explaining what his brother meant to him, asking for leniency. He dropped the letter in the box for the prison censor and spent the rest of the night praying, asking Allah for some kind of relief from his confusion.

Mr. Muhammad's reply arrived soon after. If Malcolm had once believed in the truth and was now beginning to doubt it, Mr. Muhammad wrote, then he had never truly

[55] page 198 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

believed in the first place. What could make him doubt the truth, he asked, other than his own weakness?

Malcolm saw that Reginald was not living by the standards he himself had taught Malcolm to follow, and that Mr. Muhammad was right. From that day forward, as far as Malcolm was concerned, his blood brother was wrong in everything he did.

But Reginald kept visiting, and Malcolm watched him falling apart, he was mentally deteriorating. In Roxbury, Ella saw Reginald walking the streets claiming he possessed some divine power. He began claiming he was the Messenger of Allah, then that he was Allah, then that he was greater than Allah. Until he was picked up by authorities and placed in an institution.

At the time, Malcolm believed this was divine punishment. Years later after Elijah Muhammad himself was accused by his own sons of the same moral failings he had judged Reginald and so many others for, Malcolm came to a different understanding. What had broken Reginald was not divine wrath but the pain of being completely rejected by his own family for a man who turned out to be guilty of the very same thing he had condemned.

### Black Jesus

Malcolm's last year in prison was served back at the Charlestown Prison where he had started. The Norfolk officials had grown uneasy — word of his letters and his recruiting had spread, reports were written about Malcolm's activism in prison, and some of the Black inmates he had recruited talked too freely. He worried the move might delay his parole, but he also thought the authorities might prefer to have him on the outside rather than converting more men on the inside.

Charlestown was stricter and tighter, but Malcolm found an opening. A Bible class held in the prison drew several Black inmates, and Malcolm began attending. The class was led by a young seminary student from Harvard who was well prepared — Malcolm gave him credit for knowing his material. But Malcolm was waiting for the right moment. One session, after the instructor had been lecturing about Paul, Malcolm raised his hand, and when the instructor nodded, he stood up.

"What color was Paul? And I kept talking, with pauses, He had to be Black…because

he was a Hebrew…and the original Hebrews were Black…weren't they?
The instructor said yes. Malcolm was not finished.
What color was Jesus…he was Hebrew, too…wasn't he?" [56]

Every man in the room — Black and white — went rigid. The instructor paused for a moment. Then he offered what Malcolm recognized as a compromise: Jesus was brown.

Malcolm let it go. It was enough. Within a day the story had traveled through the entire prison. Wherever Malcolm walked, he could feel heads turning. And any time he found himself alongside a Black inmate, he had the same quiet question ready: have you ever heard of a man named Mr. Elijah Muhammad?

### Freedom 1952

In the spring of 1952, the Massachusetts State Parole Board voted to release Malcolm. He had spent nearly seven years behind bars, from the age of twenty to twenty-seven, and though the news should have meant an immediate homecoming, months of paperwork still lay ahead. His oldest brother, Wilfred, who managed a furniture store in Detroit's Black neighborhood, arranged the terms of his parole: the store's owner signed a guarantee of employment, and Malcolm would be released into Wilfred's custody.

The family pushed Malcolm toward Detroit rather than Boston or Harlem, to stay away from all the bad history in these places. His sister Hilda, especially, had written to urge him to come join a temple of practicing Muslims, because regardless of how much he had absorbed of Mr. Muhammad's teachings through letters and reading, there was still a great deal he would need to learn in person.

In a few months, he was given a cheap suit, a small amount of money, and a brief lecture, and finally he walked freely through the gate. He stopped first at a Turkish bath, trying to wash away whatever residue of prison still clung to his skin, and then stayed one night with Ella in Boston. And before catching a bus to Detroit, Malcolm bought three things.

"I have thought, since, that without fully knowing it, I was preparing for what my life was about to become. Because those are three things I've used more than anything else. My eyeglasses correct the astigmatism that I got from all the reading in prison. I travel

[56] Page 204 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

so much now that my wife keeps alternate suitcases packed so that, when necessary, I can just grab one. And you won't find anybody more time-conscious than I am. I live by my watch, keeping appointments. Even when I'm using my car, I drive by my watch, not my speedometer. Time is more important to me than distance" [57]

Wilfred's store sat in the middle of Detroit's Black ghetto, and Malcolm started selling furniture the day he arrived. The store's owners were white, and what Malcolm saw there deepened the thoughts that had already been developing about the white man's world. Cheap, gaudy furniture—sofas with fabric stapled on, imitation leopard-skin bedspreads, fake tiger-skin rugs—was sold to Black families on credit at three and four times its actual cost. "Nothing Down" signs drew customers through the door, and Malcolm watched as working people with rough, calloused hands signed contracts whose fine print locked them into ruinous interest rates. The money moved in one direction only: out of the ghetto and into the white neighborhoods where a Black person was not welcome unless he worked there for someone else.

Malcolm had spent years in the streets before prison, hustling and chasing fast money, but he had never truly understood the pattern beneath what he was seeing. Now, through the new lens of what he had read and studied, the machinery that exploited his people became visible.

### Serenity

Wilfred invited Malcolm to stay at his house. There was warmth, order, and a rhythm to each day that Malcolm had never experienced in any home before.

Wilfred, as the father, rose first each morning and performed his ablutions, starting with: "In the name of Allah, I perform the ablution." Then Malcolm followed, then Wilfred's wife Ruth, then the children. The bathroom was used in calm sequence rather than the rush that marked most households at dawn. When family members met for the first time each morning, they greeted one another softly: "As-Salaam-Alaikum"—peace be upon you. Wilfred would spread the prayer rug while the others prepared, and the family lined up facing east, stepped from their slippers, and prayed together.

[57] Page 206 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Every element of the routine was explained to Malcolm gently and patiently by his brother. The household ran on a quiet discipline that Malcolm, who had known only the imposed discipline of prison, had never seen followed freely.

> "I had never dreamed of anything like that atmosphere among Black people who had learned to be proud they were Black, who had learned to love other Black people instead of being jealous and suspicious."[58]

## Detroit's Temple

Detroit's Temple Number One met on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays in a storefront at 1470 Frederick Street, with three hog-slaughtering pens running nearby and the sound of squealing animals bleeding through the walls during meetings. It was a modest beginning—the original temple, established by Master W. D. Fard back in 1931—but what Malcolm found inside it was unlike anything he had experienced among Black people before.

The men dressed modestly. The women wore ankle-length gowns, no makeup, and scarves covering their heads. The children treated adults and one another with respect and good manners. People greeted each other as "Brother" and "Sister," and the men clasped each other's hands with both of their own when they met, smiling with what Malcolm recognized as genuine warmth. The women, whether married or single, were treated with a respect he had never seen Black men extend to their women before.

Minister Lemuel Hassan led the meetings, lecturing from beside a Blackboard that served as the temple's permanent visual argument. One half displayed a red-backed crescent and star—the Muslim flag, as they taught it—above the words "Islam: Freedom, Justice, Equality." The other half showed the American flag over the words "Slavery, Suffering and Death," with a cross and, beneath it, the image of a Black man lynched from a tree. At the bottom of the board ran a single question: "Which One Will Survive the War of Armageddon?"

Malcolm sat through those early meetings fully present, and right away he noticed that the temple was not full. The streets outside filled with Black people who had never heard any of this. The prevailing attitude among the membership, as Malcolm read it, amounted to an assumption that Allah would bring new converts when the time was right. Malcolm

[58] P.208 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

disagreed. He lived in those streets—Harlem or Detroit, the chemistry was the same—and he was certain that if you wanted to reach people, you had to go out and find them.

> "From what I could gather, the recruitment attitude at the temple seemed to me to amount to a self-defeating waiting view…an assumption that Allah would bring us more Muslims. I felt that Allah would be more inclined to help those who helped themselves."[59]

On the Sunday before Labor Day in 1952, a caravan of about ten automobiles carried Detroit's Temple Number One members south to Chicago to visit Temple Number Two. Malcolm rode with Wilfred, and he would later say that he had not felt such anticipation since childhood. Perhaps two hundred Muslims gathered that afternoon—a small number by the standards of the mass rallies Malcolm would eventually address.

Mr. Muhammad came toward the platform from the rear of the temple, a small, slight figure encircled by the strapping men of the Fruit of Islam guard, all of them in dark suits, white shirts, and bow ties. Mr. Muhammad wore a gold-embroidered fez. This was the man who, for years, had answered every letter Malcolm sent from his cell—a stranger writing faithfully to a prisoner he had never met. Everything Malcolm had heard about him pointed to one idea: that this small, quiet man had endured more than most people could bear, all because he believed he owed it to Black people in America. When Mr. Muhammad's voice filled the room, Malcolm leaned forward and did not move.

> "I have not stopped one day for the past twenty-one years. I have been standing, preaching to you throughout those past twenty-one years, while I was free, and even while I was in bondage. I spent three and one-half years in the federal penitentiary, and also over a year in the city jail for teaching this truth. I was also deprived of a father's love for his family for seven long years while I was running from hypocrites and other enemies of this word and revelation of God—which will give life to you, and put you on the same level with all other civilized and independent nations and peoples of this planet earth…."[60]

Mr. Muhammad spoke of how Black people in America had been robbed of everything that connected them to who they were—names, tongues, histories, the very memory of

[59] P.209 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[60] P.211 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

where they came from—and of how recovering that knowledge could lift a people out of the degradation that centuries of oppression had imposed on them.

Then he paused and called Malcolm's name. He asked Malcolm to stand, and told the assembly that this brother had just come out of prison and praised how strong he had been during his years inside. Every day for years, Mr. Muhammad said, Malcolm had written him a letter, and he wrote back as often as he could.

That evening, Mr. Muhammad invited everyone from Detroit—the whole group, including Minister Lemuel Hassan—to have dinner at his home, an eighteen-room house on Woodlawn Avenue in Chicago that his followers had recently persuaded him to accept. When they arrived, Mr. Muhammad was still painting parts of it himself. At dinner, instead of lecturing, he encouraged his guests to talk. Malcolm asked Mr. Muhammad how many Muslims there were supposed to be in Temple Number One.

"There are supposed to be thousands," Mr. Muhammad said.

Malcolm asked what in his opinion was the best way to get thousands there.

"Go after the young people," Mr. Muhammad answered. "Once you get them, the older ones will follow through shame." [61]

## Malcolm X

Back in Detroit, Malcolm went to Minister Lemuel Hassan and offered his services for a recruitment drive. Every evening after work at the furniture store, he went into the streets to do what the Muslims would later call "fishing"—approaching people in ghetto bars, in poolrooms, on corners, pulling them into conversation about the teachings. He understood how people in those neighborhoods talked and what moved them, because he had been one of them not so long ago. Most people were not interested. Only a handful showed any curiosity, and when he managed to get a few to promise they would visit the temple, barely half kept the promise.

During this time, Malcolm's membership application was processed, and he received from Chicago his "X". The letter replaced the surname "Little", which had been imposed on his father's ancestors by a white slaveholder whose identity was lost to history. The "X"

[61] P.213 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

stood for the true African family name that he could never know. From that day forward, in the Nation of Islam, he became known as *Malcolm X*.

Slowly, month by month, a few more cars joined the caravans to Chicago. The storefront temple's membership roughly tripled within a few months, and Mr. Muhammad was pleased enough to pay Detroit a personal visit and give Malcolm warm praise. Then Minister Lemuel Hassan invited Malcolm to speak. He began with personal testimony—what the teachings had done for him—and when he was encouraged to deliver a full lecture, he drew on everything he had devoured in prison, especially the history of Christianity's role in slavery. He stood in that storefront, and addressed seventy-five to a hundred faces:

> **"**My brothers and sisters, our white slavemaster's Christian religion has taught us Black people here in the wilderness of North America that we will sprout wings when we die and fly up into the sky where God will have for us a special place called heaven. This is white man's Christian religion used to brainwash us Black people! We have accepted it! We have embraced it! We have believed it! We have practiced it! And while we are doing all of that, for himself, this blue-eyed devil has twisted his Christianity, to keep his foot on our backs…to keep our eyes fixed on the pie in the sky and heaven in the hereafter…while he enjoys his heaven right here…on this earth…in this life.**"**[62]

And he would speak about the legacy of slavery—the violence done to Black families across generations, the deliberate destruction of identity—and then turn the question back on his audience:

> **"**Turn around and look at each other, brothers and sisters, and think of this! You and me, polluted all these colors—and this devil has the arrogance and the gall to think we, his victims, should love him!**"** [63]

Sometimes after speaking he would walk the streets alone for hours, too consumed by what he had learned about what had been done to his people to talk to anyone.

In the summer of 1953, Malcolm was named Assistant Minister of Detroit Temple Number One. He decided afterwards to leave the furniture store for a slightly better-

[62] Page 214 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[63] Page 216 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

paying job at the Gar Wood factory, where large garbage-truck bodies were manufactured, and Malcolm cleaned up behind the welders after each one was finished.

As a young minister, Malcolm traveled to Chicago to see Mr. Muhammad whenever he could manage time away—first from the furniture store, then from Gar Wood, and later from a job on a Ford Motor Company assembly line. At Mr. Muhammad's home on Woodlawn Avenue, Malcolm was treated as if he was part of the family. They would sit at the dinner table for hours after eating, and Malcolm would ride along as Mr. Muhammad drove his daily rounds among the few grocery stores the Muslims owned in Chicago.

At a drugstore on Wentworth and 31st Street, Mr. Muhammad would sometimes pick up a broom and sweep the floor himself, as a lesson to his followers that idleness and laziness were sins. Malcolm wanted to take the broom from him, thinking the man was far too important for such work, but Mr. Muhammad would not allow it. He would only let Malcolm stay beside him and listen.

Malcolm also spent hours with Mr. Muhammad's mother, Mother Marie, who told him about her son's childhood in Sandersville, Georgia. She said that as a girl of seven she had a vision that she would one day be the mother of a great man. Her son Elijah, born in 1897 to a Baptist minister named Reverend Poole, had been different from his siblings almost from the time he could walk—small and frail, but he was the one who settled the older children's disputes and became their leader. Poverty forced him out of school by the time he finished fourth grade, and what further education he received came from an older sister who tutored him in the evenings. He spent hours with the Bible, weeping because he felt that its words were a locked door, and he could not find the key.

Mr. Muhammad told Malcolm about his early working years in Georgia, how he could never tolerate being cursed by white employers. He would politely ask them to fire him if they did not like his work, but not to curse him. After a white employer did curse him in early 1923, he took his young family north to Detroit, arriving at the age of twenty-five.

It was in Detroit, in 1931, that Mr. Muhammad first encountered a man called W. D. Fard—a small, light-skinned man who went door to door in the Black neighborhoods during the Depression, selling silks and yard goods, calling himself "a brother from the East". Fard began holding small meetings in the homes of the people he visited, teaching from both the Bible and the Quran, and among his most receptive students was Elijah Poole. Fard's central message was that the religion of Black people was not Christianity but Islam, that the name of God was Allah, and that the ancestors of every Black person

in America had been Muslim—torn from their nation four centuries earlier and kept in ignorance of their own heritage ever since. He renamed Elijah Poole first "Elijah Karriem" and then "Elijah Muhammad," made him Supreme Minister over the other early converts, and for three and a half years gave him private instruction. Fard established a University of Islam in Detroit in 1931, set up Temple Number Two in Chicago, and laid the groundwork for a temple in Milwaukee. Then, in 1934, he vanished without a trace.

What followed for Mr. Muhammad were years of persecution. Rival ministers, jealous of his position, forced him out of Detroit and then pursued him to Chicago, to Washington, and from city to city. He rarely stayed anywhere long, slipping home when he could see his wife Clara and their growing family, who survived on whatever other members of the community could spare. In 1942, despite being well past draft age, he was arrested on a charge of evading military service and sentenced to five years. He spent three and a half of those years in the federal prison at Milan, Michigan, before being paroled in 1946 to resume his work.

Malcolm absorbed all of this—the origin story, the persecution, the sacrifice—and it only deepened the devotion that had taken root in his prison cell. He became Elijah Muhammad's most faithful servant, his most devoted student.

> **"**I was his most faithful servant, and I know today that I did believe in him more firmly than he believed in himself. In the years to come, I was going to have to face a psychological and spiritual crisis.**"** [64]

[64] P.224 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Part 4 | Minister Malcolm X

## Chapter 7

### The Mission

Malcolm left his job at Ford Motor Company's Lincoln-Mercury division with a very clear purpose. Mr. Muhammad needed ministers who could carry his teachings into cities where millions of Black Americans lived, and Malcolm felt in his bones that this was what all his life had been preparing him for.

> "I have always been an activist, and my personal chemistry perhaps made me reach more quickly than most ministers in the Nation of Islam that stage of dedication." [65]

He traveled to Chicago to meet Mr. Muhammad, and for months he studied under the man he was deeply attached to. Malcolm immersed himself in worship rituals, in the organizational structure of the Nation, in the interrelated teachings drawn from the Bible and the Quran, going to bed each night more convinced that only divine intervention could have placed such knowledge in a man who had come out of the sawmills and cotton fields of Georgia with nothing beyond a fourth-grade education. Boston was Malcolm's next mission, given to him by Mr. Muhammad.

A brother named Lloyd X had been quietly cultivating interest in Islam among a small circle of people in his neighborhood, and he opened his living room at 5 Wellington Street for Malcolm to speak. The audiences were modest, maybe a dozen people, seated on chairs and couches in a private home. Malcolm's favorite introduction was:

> "God has given Mr. Muhammad some sharp truth. It is like a two-edged sword. It cuts into you. It causes you great pain, but if you can take the truth, it will cure you and save you from what otherwise would be certain death." [66]

From there he moved quickly into what would become the defining architecture of his early preaching — a sweeping account of the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath, delivered and driven by emotions that left his listeners shaken:

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[65] Page 225 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[66] Page 225 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

> "Not even in the Bible is there such a crime! God in His wrath struck down with fire the perpetrators of lesser crimes! One hundred million of us Black people! Your grandparents! Mine! Murdered by this white man. To get fifteen million of us here to make us his slaves, on the way he murdered one hundred million!" [67]

The audience kept growing, and those who had attended once came back the following week and brought others with them, because nobody in those rooms had ever heard a Black man speak this way. After roughly three months, enough had committed that they were able to rent a small space and set up folding chairs — a proper temple at last, which Malcolm reported with immense joy to Mr. Muhammad.

It was around this time that his sister Ella began attending his services. She sat and watched as though she could not quite believe that this was the same young man she had once taken in. She never stood when Malcolm asked believers to rise, but she contributed money when the collection was taken. He knew Ella's mind — cautious, fiercely independent, and resistant to joining anything.

At the close of each meeting, Malcolm recited the prayer Mr. Muhammad had taught him before dismissing the congregation:

> "Do nothing unto anyone that you would not like to have done unto yourself. Seek peace, and never be the aggressor—but if anyone attacks you, we do not teach you to turn the other cheek. May Allah bless you to be successful and victorious in all that you do." [68]

## Old Friend

With Temple Eleven established in Boston, Malcolm had his first real reason in seven years to walk the Roxbury streets where he had once lived his hustling days. He found Shorty, who heard through the wire that Malcolm was back on some kind of religious mission and did not quite know what to make of it. Malcolm slipped into their old way of talking and put him at ease, and the two of them laughed until they cried remembering the courtroom scene, Shorty imitating the judge stacking sentence upon sentence while they stood there in disbelief. Shorty studied music in prison and was playing in a small band now, doing well enough. Malcolm tried sharing what Islam meant to him, but Shorty wasn't interested, and when Shorty deflected with a joke, Malcolm let the subject go.

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[67] Page 226 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[68] Page 228 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He saw other people he had known — John Hughes, who still had his gambling operation, and a handful of others from the old days — but the word about Malcolm's transformation had made most of them uneasy, and he did not try to convert those who clearly did not want it.

By March 1954, Malcolm had organized Temple Eleven well enough to leave it in the hands of a minister named Ulysses X, and Mr. Muhammad sent him on to Philadelphia. The response there came even faster — Temple Twelve was up and running by the end of May, in just under three months. And then, because of those successes in Boston and Philadelphia, Mr. Muhammad gave Malcolm the assignment he had been building toward: minister of Temple Seven, in New York City.

Malcolm understood the value of a city such as New York. If Mr. Muhammad's teachings were ever going to take hold across Black America, it would have to happen in New York, where more than a million Black people lived in the city's five boroughs and Harlem alone was the most densely populated Black community on earth.

The last time Malcolm had moved through the streets of New York, he and West Indian Archie had been chasing each other with guns. Now Malcolm was a minister in a suit with close-cropped natural hair where the old processed conk used to be, and everywhere he went the old hustlers called out with shock and something close to nervous joy, offering drinks he politely refused.

The bad news came quickly. Sammy, one of the sharpest operators Malcolm had known, had gotten out of the street life, even married — and then, not long after the wedding, was found dead. Malcolm kept searching, the person he most wanted to find was West Indian Archie. Nobody could say exactly where Archie had gone, only that he was not dead and had not left the city. Meanwhile Malcolm kept running into men he had once known as fierce, dangerous figures in the Harlem underworld.

> **"**I heard the usual hustler fates of so many others. Bullets, knives, prison, dope, diseases, insanity, alcoholism. I imagined it was about in that order. And so many of the survivors whom I knew as tough hyenas and wolves of the streets in the old days now were so pitiful. They had known all the angles, but beneath that surface they were poor, ignorant, untrained Black men**"** [69]

Eventually the street network tracked Archie down: he had a room somewhere in the Bronx, sick and alone. Malcolm hired a cab and went straight there. The man who answered the door was barefoot in pajamas, blinking and gaunt, barely recognizable as the towering figure who had once recorded hundreds of number combinations in his head

[69] Page 230 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

without writing down a single number. It took Archie a moment to place the face in front of him, and then his voice came out: “Red! I’m so glad to see you!”

Malcolm helped him to get to bed, sat in the room’s only chair, and told Archie something he had been carrying for years — that being forced out of Harlem had saved his life, because it had turned him toward Islam. Archie admitted that he had not truly intended to go through with it, and Malcolm confessed how many times he had shuddered thinking about how close they had both come to pulling the trigger. They agreed that the old dispute over the numbers hit did not mean anything anymore. Malcolm tried to share some of what he had learned from Mr. Muhammad, and when he told Archie that a mind capable of recording hundreds of number combinations ought to have been put to use in mathematics or science, Archie grew quiet and said, “Red, that sure is something to think about.”

### Back to Harlem

**“**I can’t start to describe for you my welter of emotions. For Mr. Muhammad’s teachings really to resurrect American Black people, Islam obviously had to grow, to grow very big. And nowhere in America was such a single temple potential available as in New York’s five boroughs. They contained over a million Black people.**”** [70]

Temple Seven, when Malcolm arrived first time in the summer of 1954, was a storefront so small that every Muslim in New York City could have fit on a single bus. He would stand before his tiny congregation and preach with everything in him, and when he asked who wanted to follow Mr. Muhammad, two or three people would rise. Sometimes not even that many.

The problem was obvious: Harlem was saturated with voices competing for the attention of Black people who were fed up with their conditions. Nationalist groups, “Buy Black!” campaigns, stepladder orators on every busy corner — all of them working the same territory with the same audience. Malcolm wanted to find a way to cut through the noise.

His first move was simple: he had leaflets printed and organized teams of Muslim brothers to hand them out on every well-traveled street, stepping directly into the path of pedestrians so they had no choice but to accept the paper and hear a sentence or two about what Mr. Muhammad taught. Then came a sharper tactic, what Malcolm called “fishing” — working the fringes of crowds that other speakers had already drawn to Nationalist rallies, handing out flyers and saying, “Come hear us too, brother.” Anyone standing at a

[70] Page 229 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Nationalist meeting was already alert to the plight of Black America; Malcolm was offering them the next step.

But the richest audience of all, he discovered, were the people coming out of Harlem's small storefront churches. The large congregations were no use — their members, Malcolm judged, were too invested in middle-class respectability to set foot in a place like Temple Seven. The tiny evangelical churches were different. They were always organizing food sales to cover the rent and spent several evenings a week rehearsing gospel music with guitars and tambourines, and every Sunday afternoon their small congregations spilled out onto the sidewalk just before Temple Seven's two o'clock service. These were mostly people who had come up from the South, many of them older, who loved preaching and would follow it wherever it led. Malcolm and his brothers moved fast among them, pressing flyers into their hands and urging them to come and hear what Mr. Muhammad was teaching.

> **"**I saw the new faces of our Temple Seven meetings. And then we discovered the best "fishing" audience of all, by far the best-conditioned audience for Mr. Muhammad's teachings: the Christian churches." [71]

When for those new faces appeared at Temple Seven, he had shaped his message specifically for people raised in a Christian church.

> **"**You see my tears, brothers and sisters….Tears haven't been in my eyes since I was a young boy. But I cannot help this when I feel the responsibility I have to help you comprehend for the first time what this white man's religion that we call Christianity has done to us…."[72]
>
> **"**Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us Black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We're worshiping a Jesus that doesn't even look like us! Now, just think of this. The blond-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a white Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that's his God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we die, to wait until death, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're dead, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on this earth!"[73]

[71] Page 233 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[72] Page 234 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[73] Page 234 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He told them to go home and look at the streets where they lived, and then to cross Central Park and see how white New Yorkers lived — the apartments, the storefronts, the wealth stretching all the way to the southern end of the island. He preached directly to the women in his audience, too, because he had noticed that the storefront churches drew far more women than the Nationalist rallies ever did:

> "Beautiful Black women! The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that the Black man is going around saying he wants respect; well, the Black man never will get anybody's respect until he first learns to respect his own women! The Black man needs today to stand up and throw off the weaknesses imposed upon him by the slavemaster white man! The Black man needs to start today to shelter and protect and respect his Black women!"[74]

The response was powerful — every hand in the room would go up when Malcolm asked the audience to stand if they accepted what he had told them. But when he took the next step and asked who was ready to follow Mr. Muhammad, only a painful few would stand. Malcolm understood what held them back. The Nation of Islam enforced a strict moral code that most people were simply not prepared to accept: no alcohol, tobacco, or narcotics; no pork or unhealthy foods; no gambling, no movies, no dating; no lying, no stealing, no domestic conflict. Members were expected to work hard, pray regularly, treat their families with courtesy, and submit to the discipline of the Fruit of Islam, the trained brothers who enforced these standards. Those who violated the rules faced suspension, isolation, or expulsion. It was the code — the cost of membership — that made people go home without joining.

### Temple Seven

"I had learned early one important thing, and that was to always teach in terms that the people could understand."[75]

Malcolm did not wait for Temple Seven to grow on its own. During the week he traveled to teach at Philadelphia's Temple Twelve every Wednesday and to plant seeds in new cities. In Springfield, Massachusetts, with the help of a brother named Osborne whom Malcolm had first talked about Islam in prison, Temple Thirteen was established. A woman who had attended a Springfield meeting invited Malcolm to Hartford, where she gathered about fifteen domestic workers — maids, cooks, chauffeurs, housemen — in her

[74] Page 235 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[75] Page 235 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

housing-project apartment on a Thursday afternoon, the traditional day off for household staff. These were people who worked in the homes of wealthy white families, and as Malcolm would reflect, the old saying held true: no man is a hero to his valet. They listened with sharp attention, and before long Hartford had its own temple, number fourteen, with Malcolm teaching there every Thursday.

Whenever Malcolm visited Mr. Muhammad in Chicago, Malcolm could barely hide his frustration that the Nation was not expanding fast enough, but the elder man gently reminded him to be patient:

> "Most people seeing a man in an old touring car going real slow think the man doesn't want to go fast. But the man knows that to drive any faster would destroy the old car. When he gets a fast car, then he will drive at a fast speed."[76]

In 1955, Malcolm made his first long trip, traveling south to help open Temple Fifteen in Atlanta. A brother from Philadelphia named James X had moved to the city and done the groundwork, but the only space he could afford to rent was a funeral parlor.

The Nation's own funeral services, which Malcolm occasionally conducted as a minister overseeing several temples, were unlike anything most Black Americans had ever seen. There were no flowers, no organ music, no weeping — only a prayer, a brief reading of the departed's life, and passages from the Book of David about the finality of death. Then came a gesture Malcolm always described with quiet tenderness: appointed sisters would pass small trays of thin, round peppermint candies, and everyone would place one in their mouth as they filed past the casket for a last look.

> "We shed tears for our brother, and gave him our music and our tears while he was alive. If he wasn't wept for and given our music and flowers then, well, now there is no need, because he is no longer aware. We will file by now for a last look at our brother. We won't cry—just as we don't cry over candy. Just as this sweet candy will dissolve, so will our brother's sweetness that we have enjoyed when he lived now dissolve into a sweetness in our memories."[77]

Hundreds of people over the years would tell Malcolm that attending one of these funerals was the first thing that attracted them toward the Nation — though he himself would later learn that the Nation's understanding of death differed sharply from how the mainstream Muslims globally practiced and believed.

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[76] Page 237 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[77] Page 238 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

By 1956, the Nation had grown in numbers and reached the wider Black community.

**"**But more than just increase in numbers, Mr. Muhammad's version of Islam now had been getting in some other types of Black people. We began now getting those with some education, both academic, and vocations and trades, and even some with "positions" in the white world, and all of this was starting to bring us closer to the desired fast car for Mr. Muhammad to drive.**"** [78]

That year, the Nation bought a new Chevrolet and assigned it to Malcolm for his continuous traveling. He owned nothing himself — no car, no property, just his clothes, a wristwatch, and a suitcase. His living expenses were covered, and he carried a small amount of pocket money, but where once there had been nothing he would not have done for a dollar, money was now the last thing on his mind. In five months, he put thirty thousand miles on the Chevrolet, crisscrossing the Northeast to recruit new members and scout new temple sites.

### Betty 1958

Throughout his years of non-stop work, Malcolm kept himself deliberately apart from any personal attachment, particularly to women. He had seen too many men in positions of responsibility ruined by the wrong relationship, and Mr. Muhammad himself had encouraged him to remain single. Sisters in the various temples would hint that he needed a wife, and Malcolm always made it plain that the subject held no interest for him.

But in 1956, a young woman joined Temple Seven who attracted Malcolm right away. Her name was Sister Betty X — tall, brown-skinned, a native of Detroit who had studied education at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and was now completing her nursing training at one of New York's large hospitals. She taught hygiene and health in the women's classes at the temple, and Malcolm, who would sometimes look in on the various weeknight meetings — the men's Fruit of Islam training on Mondays, Unity Night on Tuesdays, the women's classes on Thursdays — would exchange a few words with her about how the sisters were progressing. She would answer, "Fine, Brother Minister," and he would say, "Thank you, Sister," and that would be all.

One day he decided to plan a trip with her to the Museum of Natural History to see certain exhibits related to Mr. Muhammad's teachings. While they were there, he asked different questions, to get some sense of how she thinks. He was impressed by both her intelligence and her education, which at that time was unique among the Nation's membership.

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[78] Page 239 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Not long after, Malcolm learned through one of the older sisters that Betty was facing a dilemma. When she told her foster parents in Detroit that she had become a Muslim, they gave her a choice: leave the Nation or lose their financial support for her nursing program. She was near the end of her training, and she chose Islam, supporting herself with babysitting jobs for doctors on the hospital grounds. The fact that she had never revealed any of this to Malcolm, even when she had the opportunity, left a profound impact on him.

He began to turn the idea of marriage over in his mind. He weighed Mr. Muhammad's teaching that a couple should be well-matched in height and age, and he noted that Betty had few close relatives — which mattered to a man who had seen too many Muslim marriages torn apart by disapproving in-laws. Still, he decided to take his time.

He told Mr. Muhammad, on a visit to Chicago, that he was considering a serious step. Mr. Muhammad smiled and said he would like to meet the sister. Arrangements were made for Betty to travel to Chicago as part of the routine rotation of instructor sisters who visited the headquarters temple. After the visit, Mr. Muhammad told Malcolm he thought she was a fine sister.

Malcolm one Sunday evening, when Temple Seven's weekly service had ended, he got in his car and drove through the night toward Detroit, where his brother Wilfred was now minister of Temple One. At about ten the next morning — January 14, 1958, a Tuesday — Malcolm pulled into a gas station, walked to the pay phone on the wall, and dialed the operator to get the hospital switchboard, because he had always made it a point never to commit Betty's number to memory. When she came to the phone and said, "Oh, hello, Brother Minister," he said it directly *"Look, do you want to get married?"*

She said yes. He told her she had better catch a plane to Detroit.

They tried Indiana first, but a recent change in state law had introduced a waiting period, so they drove to Lansing, where Malcolm's brother Philbert lived. They got the blood tests, the license — Malcolm wrote "Muslim" on the line for religion — and stood before a justice of the peace. An elderly white man performed the ceremony, with an all-white group of witnesses looking on. When the official said, "Kiss your bride," Malcolm got her out of there. They had dinner at Philbert's house, and when Philbert arrived home from work and Malcolm announced he had a surprise, his brother said Malcolm did not have any surprise for him — he had already heard that his brother had been through town introducing a Muslim sister, and he knew exactly what that meant.

Betty flew back to New York to finish her nursing term, and when she returned the following Saturday, Mr. Muhammad, who was teaching at Detroit's Temple One that Sunday, made the announcement himself. The sisters supported Betty's decision, and Malcolm never forgot hearing one of them saying, "You got him!"

They settled in Queens, sharing a two-unit house with another Muslim couple, and soon moved to a seven-room house in a Black neighborhood in Queens. Their first daughter, Attallah, was born in November 1958. Qubilah came on Christmas Day 1960, followed by Ilyasah in July 1962 and Amilah in 1964. Malcolm was away more than he was home — sometimes for months — and Betty held the household together with a steadiness he knew most women would not have been able to sustain.

> "You see, Islam is the only religion that gives both husband and wife a true understanding of what love is. The Western "love" concept, you take it apart, it really is lust. But love transcends just the physical. Love is disposition, behavior, attitude, thoughts, likes, dislikes—these things make a beautiful woman, a beautiful wife. This is the beauty that never fades. You find in your Western civilization that when a man's wife's physical beauty fails, she loses her attraction. But Islam teaches us to look into the woman, and teaches her to look into us. Betty does this, so she understands me. I would even say I don't imagine many other women might put up with the way I am. Awakening this brainwashed Black man and telling this arrogant, devilish white man the truth about himself, Betty understands, is a full-time job. If I have work to do when I am home, the little time I am at home, she lets me have the quiet I need to work in. I'm rarely at home more than half of any week; I have been away as much as five months. I never get much chance to take her anywhere, and I know she likes to be with her husband. She is used to my calling her from airports anywhere from Boston to San Francisco, or Miami to Seattle, or, here lately, cabling her from Cairo, Accra, or the Holy City of Mecca. Once on the long-distance telephone, Betty told me in beautiful phrasing the way she thinks. She said, "You are present when you are away." [79]

## Solidarity

Later that same year, Malcolm continued his ever-busy schedule, teaching and organizing events across every city he could reach. At a meeting in Boston, he closed the way he always did, asking the audience to rise if they were ready to walk the path Mr. Muhammad had laid out — and then, among those who stood, he saw a face he had never expected: Ella. Five years she had listened and watched and weighed before she was ready. The Nation had a saying about people like Ella: that the ones who take the longest to come around become the strongest believers of all.

By this point, the Nation of Islam had grown into a sizable presence in the major cities, particularly Detroit, Chicago, and New York, but because it had no public presence in the media, most of the outside world had no idea it existed. That changed in one night.

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[79] Page 247 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

One night in Harlem, two white police officers who were breaking up a street dispute ordered Black bystanders to move along. Two of those bystanders happened to be members of Temple Seven — one of them was a brother named Johnson Hinton. When they did not leave fast enough, the officers attacked Hinton with nightsticks, splitting his scalp open, and hauled him off to the local precinct. The second brother reached the temple restaurant and began making phone calls, and within half an hour roughly fifty members of the Fruit of Islam had assembled in silent, disciplined formation on the sidewalk outside the station.

Other people from the neighborhood, watching the scene, organized Black men, came running to see what was happening, and the crowd behind the Muslims multiplied quickly. Police officers looking out from the station door and windows had never seen anything like it. Malcolm walked into the station and told the officers that he wanted to see the injured man. The police first said Hinton was not there, then admitted he was but refused to let Malcolm in. Malcolm told them clearly: until Hinton was seen and given proper medical attention, the Muslims were not going anywhere.

When Malcolm was finally allowed in, Hinton was barely conscious, his head and face were covered in blood. Malcolm told the officer in charge that the man needed to go to a hospital. An ambulance was called, and as it carried Hinton to Harlem Hospital the Muslims followed on foot, marching toward Lenox Avenue to the hospital, some fifteen blocks through one of the busiest corridors in Harlem. People came running from shops, diners, and bars along the route to watch something none of them had ever seen — a disciplined body of Black men marching together as one, through the heart of Harlem.

Outside the hospital, a senior police official told Malcolm to get the crowd out of there. Malcolm replied that his brothers were peaceful and perfectly disciplined. The official pointed to the angry mass of people gathered behind the Muslims. Malcolm told him those people were the police department's problem, not the Nation's. When doctors confirmed that Hinton was receiving proper care, Malcolm gave the signal, and the Muslims dissolved quietly into the night. Hinton would later need a steel plate in his skull, and a jury awarded him over seventy thousand dollars — the largest police-brutality judgment New York City had ever paid.

The major downtown newspapers treated the incident as another brief entry under the familiar heading of racial tension in Harlem. But in Harlem itself, the Amsterdam News gave the incident full front-page coverage. And across Harlem , at the society level, people who had never heard the words "Nation of Islam" were suddenly asking each other about those Muslims.

# Chapter 8

Photograph of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad ca. 1959 [80]

## Muhammed Speaks

Before the spring of 1959, the Nation of Islam was still a name that most Americans never heard of, and whose influence barely reached beyond their temples in a few Black neighborhoods. That was about to change, and it would change fast — not because Malcolm or Mr. Muhammad had run some grand publicity campaign, but because two outsiders, acting independently in the circles of media and academia, happened to channel their attention toward the Nation at almost the same time.

The first was Louis Lomax, a Black journalist based in New York, who approached Malcolm one morning and asked if the Nation of Islam would agree to be filmed for a television documentary on the Mike Wallace Show, a program that thrived on controversy. Malcolm told him what he told anyone who brought such a request — it would have to go through Mr. Muhammad. Lomax flew to Chicago, sat with Mr. Muhammad, answered his

[80] https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/malcolm-x-transformation

questions, accepted certain conditions, and received permission. Before long, camera crews were moving through the temples in New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., recording services, speeches, and the daily life of the Nation's members.

The second was C. Eric Lincoln, a Black scholar pursuing his doctorate at Boston University. While teaching at Clark College in Atlanta the year before, Lincoln had received a student's term paper that opened with a direct challenge to the Christianity most Black Americans had grown up with — an argument that the church had failed Black people on matters of dignity and equality, that it had divided believers by color even while preaching universal brotherhood. The student had been visiting the Nation's Temple Fifteen in Atlanta. Lincoln recognized he had stumbled onto something significant, secured research grants, and began expanding his thesis into a full-length book.

Meanwhile, Malcolm was working to build the Nation's own media presence. He vistied James Hicks, editor of Harlem's Amsterdam News, and persuaded him to run a weekly column. When Mr. Muhammad agreed to write for the Amsterdam News himself, Malcolm's column moved to the Los Angeles Herald Dispatch. But Malcolm wanted something more — a newspaper owned and published end to end by the Nation. When Mr. Muhammad sent him to Los Angeles in 1957 to organize a new temple there, Malcolm spent time at the Herald Dispatch offices, watching how a paper was assembled, learning the mechanics of layout and production. Malcolm's instinct, from the hustling days, knew that if he watched something done once, he could usually figure out how to repeat it on his own.

Back in New York, he bought a used camera and began taking photos and collecting small news items about the Nation's activities. Once a month he would lock himself in a room, arrange his material, and send it to a printer. He called the paper *“Muhammad Speaks”*. Muslim brothers sold copies on the sidewalks of Black neighborhoods.

Even before the documentary or Lincoln's book appeared, Mr. Muhammad sent Malcolm on a three-week journey to Africa and the Middle East — to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Nigeria, and Ghana. Some African and Asian leaders had quietly sent word through various channels that they admired Mr. Muhammad's efforts to awaken Black Americans, and Malcolm traveled carrying the Nation’s mission, carrying greetings and building connections that would deepen in the years ahead.

## That Hate

Late in 1959, the television documentary was finally released. However, the title was *"The Hate That Hate Produced"*, and its editors assembled the footage into a sequence designed for maximum impact — Mr. Muhammad and his ministers teaching to Black audiences, the disciplined ranks of the Fruit of Islam, the white-scarved Muslim sisters, the Nation's restaurants and businesses, members flowing in and out of mosques. Every frame, every cut, every phrase of narration was calibrated to shock.

> "Every phrase was edited to increase the shock mood. As the producers intended, I think people sat just about limp when the program went off."[81]

The response was fast and enormous. The following morning, everyone in New York was talking about it, in barbershops and living rooms and office hallways, across every neighborhood and every community in the city. In Malcolm's view, it was the title more than anything else that did the work. "The Hate That Hate Produced" stamped an image onto the public mind before a single scene had played out.

The white press moved first. Feature writers and columnists reached for every alarm they could sound — "alarming," "hate-messengers," "threat to good relations between the races," "Black segregationists," "Black supremacists." The weekly newsmagazines followed within days, piling on more labels: "hate-teachers," "violence-seekers," "Black racists," "anti-Christian," "possibly Communist-inspired." And then, as Malcolm saw it, the next phase began — the one that cut deeper.

The phone calls went out from white editors and politicians to the Black leaders they had always relied on to speak for their communities, the men and women Malcolm would come to call the "house" and "yard" Negroes — figures who held positions of influence, who were well educated and well dressed, and who could be counted on to reassure white America that everything was under control. They needed no instructions. They had watched the broadcast, read the newspapers, and already knew what was expected of them. One after another they stepped forward to denounce the Nation: "By no means do these Muslims represent the Negro masses." "An irresponsible hate cult." "A deplorable reverse-racism." "Ridiculous pretenders to the ancient Islamic doctrine."

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[81] Page 252 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

The telephone at the Nation's small Temple Seven restaurant kept ringing non-stop. Malcolm spent five hours a day with a receiver against his ear, listening to reporters and jotting notes, then calling Mr. Muhammad in Chicago to read from his notebook and get instructions. His unlisted home number leaked somehow, and Betty would set the phone down after one call only to have it ring again instantly. Calls came from San Francisco, from Maine, from London and Stockholm and Paris. Through it all, Malcolm noticed something.

> "One funny thing—in all that hectic period, something quickly struck my notice: the Europeans never pressed the "hate" question. Only the American white man was so plagued and obsessed with being "hated." He was so guilty, it was clear to me, of hating Negroes."[82]

Every time a reporter asked why the Nation taught "Black supremacy and hate, it made Malcolm furious, as the phrase itself was a provocation — a reversal of everything he saw around him, as though a country built on centuries of white supremacy had any standing to accuse its victims of the same sin.

> "For the white man to ask the Black man if he hates him is just like the rapist asking the raped, or the wolf asking the sheep, 'Do you hate me?' The white man is in no moral position to accuse anyone else of hate!" [83]

No one had ever said that in a public forum before — not with that precision, not with that willingness to name the dynamic everyone could see but no one would describe. The backlash was intense. The same leaders who had been speaking as individuals now attacked through their organizations, issuing official statements of condemnation. Malcolm called them what he saw: Black organizations with white leadership pulling the strings behind closed doors, every one of them was funded and therefore controlled by the same white establishment they claimed to be challenging. The coverage spread through Life, Look, Newsweek, Time, and newspaper chains that ran multi-part series on the Nation of Islam. The "Reader's Digest" magazine, with its worldwide circulation of twenty-four million, carried a story as well.

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[82] Page 254 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[83] Page 255 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

This triggered a wave of invitations for radio and television panel discussions — confronting scholars and Black intellectuals who had been attacking the Nation in print. He had never been inside a broadcast studio before the controversy began, let alone speaking to a microphone with an audience of millions listening. His only experience with such debates was the prison debating teams he joined years earlier. But from his hustling days he understood that every arena had its tricks, and he figured that if he watched carefully, he could learn the broadcast game the same way he had learned everything else — by studying what the people around him did and adapting fast.

When they accused him of inciting violence, Malcolm answered with an argument that reframed the entire question — that the real miracle of American history was not Black violence but Black patience, that twenty-two million people had endured centuries of brutality without rising up, and that the credit for this restraint belonged not to the system but to the depth of Black people's belief in a philosophy of turning the other cheek.

Around this time, C. Eric Lincoln's book was published. Its title — The Black Muslims in America —. The name "Black Muslims" was a source of frustration, "No!" Malcolm would correct every reporter by saying "We are Black people here in America. Our religion is Islam. We are properly called 'Muslims'!" He spent two years trying to eliminate the phrase. It never went away.

### The Podium

The mass rallies that followed were unlike anything Black America had seen. Where once the Detroit temple had proudly sent a caravan of ten automobiles to hear Mr. Muhammad in Chicago, now a hundred and fifty, two hundred, sometimes as many as three hundred chartered buses rolled the highways from the East Coast temples — the older congregations alongside new ones that the wave of publicity had helped bring into existence. Two Fruit of Islam men rode in charge on every bus. Large painted canvas banners hung from the sides, carrying the Nation's message to every car that passed and every town the buses drove through. Hundreds of Muslims drove their own vehicles. Mr. Muhammad flew in from Chicago by private plane, and from the airport to the rally hall, his motorcade moved behind a siren-screaming police escort. The same law enforcement agencies that had once dismissed the Nation as fringe now took elaborate precautions to ensure nothing went wrong.

At the rally halls — places like the St. Nicholas Arena in New York, the Coliseum in Chicago, the Uline Arena in Washington — up to ten thousand people pressed through the doors, and hundreds would arrive late and wait outside, gathering instead around loudspeakers wired outside of the building. The Fruit of Islam kept order with military precision, communicating by walkie-talkie, funneling long queues into the entrances. Inside, every man, woman, and child was thoroughly searched. The public filled the balconies and the rear half of the main floor; the all-Muslim sections — white-garbed sisters and dark-suited brothers — sat closer to the front. A section near the stage was reserved for Black professionals and intellectuals, many of them invited specifically so they would hear Mr. Muhammad's words firsthand. The front rows belonged to the press.

Up on the platform, the ministers gathered in rows of chairs behind the large seat reserved for Mr. Muhammad. Malcolm's brothers Wilfred and Philbert led the Detroit and Lansing temples. Minister Jeremiah X oversaw Atlanta. Minister Louis X of Boston — once a rising singer known as "The Charmer" — had written the Nation's first song, "White Man's Heaven is Black Man's Hell," and its first play, "Orgena" ("A Negro" spelled backwards). There were ministers who had been Seventh Day Adventists, pathologists, Christian pastors who had brought their entire congregations into the Nation. Many of these temples Malcolm helped to establish, and greeting each minister carried him back to the memory of those early days — fishing for converts on street corners and in living rooms where seven people counted as a crowd, scrubbing storefronts to spotlessness, renting folding chairs one at a time.

The program would open with the National Secretary or Minister Louis X warming the atmosphere, followed by Sister Tynetta Dynear speaking about the role of Muslim women in the Nation's work. Then Malcolm would take the microphone to prepare the audience for Mr. Muhammad's arrival.

At some point during Malcolm's address, Mr. Muhammad would be moving up the center aisle, flanked by a tight circle of Fruit of Islam guards, carrying his Bible and Quran, wearing the gold-embroidered pillbox cap that bore the crescent and star of Islam.

Then Mr. Muhammad would begin to teach, and he would not stop for nearly two hours, even when he seemed exhausted and his ministers would watch with concern for his bronchial condition. He spoke in plain language, without academic polish, conveying the same concepts about the elimination of their history, the loss of their original names and language, the religion of the slaveholder imposed as though it were universal truth:

> **“**Your slavemaster, he brought you over here, and of your past everything was destroyed. Today, you do not know your true language. What tribe are you from? You would not recognize your tribe's name if you heard it. You don't know nothing about your true culture. You don't even know your family's real name. You are wearing a white man's name! The white slavemaster, who hates you!**”**[84]

The crowd would respond loudly — "Teach, Messenger!" "You right!" "Take your time up there, little Messenger!" — until the atmosphere in the hall felt less like a political rally and more like the old camp meetings of the Black church tradition. Mr. Muhammad pressed on, his voice growing thinner but his message never faltering, until his ministers could see his hands gripping the edges of the lectern to hold himself upright. He always stopped abruptly when his body would allow no more.

Malcolm would return to the microphone for the collection, making the case that the Nation was the only Black organization funded entirely by Black money, free of white donors and therefore free of white control. The waxed paper buckets passed along the rows came back heavy with bills — far from all of them. The proceeds covered the rally expenses and fed the Nation's continuing growth.

After several rallies, Mr. Muhammad opened the doors further — first allowing white reporters to attend, thoroughly searched like everyone else, and eventually allowing a small section for white members of the public, mostly students and scholars. Malcolm would watch their faces during Mr. Muhammad's address, and the faces of the Black professionals and intellectuals in the reserved section — men and women who possessed exactly the education and skills that could have lifted their communities but who, in Malcolm's view, spent their energies trying to integrate into the very system that rejected them.

### The Recipe

The Nation's growth attracted more than press attention. The FBI and local police had the mosques under heavy surveillance; Malcolm's home phone was tapped, and he occasionally enjoyed guessing which audience members were undercover agents. "I do

[84] *Page 268 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)*

not fear them," Mr. Muhammad told him. "I have all that I need — the truth." Some of the Black agents who were sent to get into the Nation would genuinely be moved by what they heard and saw. A few resigned from their agencies altogether and joined the movement; others stayed on as double agents, feeding the Nation intelligence about government plans and surveillance operations.

One of the government's persistent worries was the Nation's success in converting men behind bars. Malcolm knew this game well. The pattern was consistent: men who had embraced the Nation's teachings while still in prison arrived on the outside already living by its strict moral code — no alcohol, no tobacco, no drugs, no pork, no gambling, no profanity. They entered the mosque qualified for membership on the day of their release. In many cases, these former inmates made more disciplined Muslims than people who had never been jailed.

But the Nation's most remarkable work was its program for curing drug addiction, a record that drew attention even from social agencies that otherwise wanted nothing to do with the organization. The method was built on a principle that outside professionals missed: the most effective person to reach an addict was someone who had been one. Muslims ex-addicts went back into the neighborhoods where they had once used, found the people who were part of their old circles, and began the slow, patient process of pulling them out.

The program moved through six stages. First, the addict had to admit to himself that he was addicted — a step that could take months of relentless, compassionate pressure from a Muslim brother who had been in the same boat. Second, it was explained to the addict what lay behind such behavior. The Muslim’s explanation was that Black addiction was, at its root, an attempt to numb the pain of being Black in white America, and that every dollar spent on drugs only enriched the system that produced the pain. Third, the addict was given hope and shown that a way out existed. Fourth, his self-image was rebuilt through the experience of being treated with genuine respect — called "Brother" and "Sir" and "Mr.," perhaps for the first time in years — until he began to believe he had the power within himself to break free. Fifth, when the addict was ready, he chose on his own to quit, and Muslim brothers sat with him around the clock through the agony of withdrawal.

"When the awful ordeal is ended, when the grip of dope is broken, the Muslims comfort the weak ex-addict, feeding him soups and broths, to get him on his feet again. He will never forget these brothers who stood by him during this time."[85]

Sixth, the recovered addict went back out to find someone else and would go with him/her through the same journey. That final step was the key that made the program work where other efforts failed: it dissolved the suspicion that addicts naturally felt toward outsiders, because the person reaching out was not an outsider. He was a friend, a former addict, someone who had shared the exact same experience. No government agency could replicate that bond, and no government agency tried to fund the Nation's program, either — though, as Malcolm pointed out, the money it saved in crime and imprisonment costs ran into millions.

### The NATION 1961

By 1961, the Nation of Islam had grown into something that would have been unimaginable just a few years earlier. The back page of "Muhammad Speaks" magazine carried an architect's rendering of a proposed twenty-million-dollar Islamic Center in Chicago — a complex that would include a mosque, a school, a library, a hospital, and a museum dedicated to the history of Black civilization. Every member contributed personally to the cost. Muslim-owned small businesses were multiplying, intended as demonstrations that Black communities could sustain themselves economically if they would only unify and keep their money circulating among their own. In Detroit and Chicago, Muslim children attended the Nation's two Universities of Islam, studying Arabic from the third grade and learning a version of history that centered their own people. Mr. Muhammad's speeches were broadcast regularly on small radio stations across the country.

Mr. Muhammad's eight children were all now working within the Nation, and Malcolm took personal pride in having played a role in that transition. Years earlier, when Mr. Muhammad first sent him out as a minister, Malcolm felt it was wrong that the Messenger's own children were working for white employers — in factories, in construction, driving taxis — while the movement grew. He had urged Mr. Muhammad to let him organize a special fundraising drive within the mosques to bring the family into

[85] Page 227 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

the Nation's operations, and Mr. Muhammad had agreed. Emanuel, the eldest, ran the dry-cleaning plant. Herbert published Muhammad Speaks — the magazine Malcolm had founded. Wallace Muhammad served as minister of the Philadelphia Mosque. The youngest, Akbar, was studying at the University of Cairo's Al-Azhar. The temples had been renamed mosques, following Mr. Muhammad's visit to several Muslim countries.

But Mr. Muhammad's health was about to change. The marathon speeches at the rallies — two hours of sustained effort from a man with chronic bronchial asthma — had taken a severe toll. Even in casual conversation, he would pause due to heavy coughing fits. Doctors recommended a dry climate, and the Nation bought a new house for him in Phoenix, Arizona. The first time Malcolm flew out to visit, he stepped off the plane into a barrage of cameras and flashing lights — not media photographers, but surveillance officers from the Arizona Intelligence Division.

Arizona's atmosphere did ease Mr. Muhammad's suffering, and he spent most of each year there from then on. But the move meant that he could no longer oversee the Nation's daily operations as closely as he once had. The volume of decisions to make — which speaking requests to accept, which organizational matters required attention — had grown beyond what one man could manage from a distance. And so Mr. Muhammad told Malcolm something that reflected the depth of his trust: from now on, in those areas, Malcolm should make the decisions himself, using his own judgment about what served the Nation's interests.

One day, Mr. Muhammad passed on a piece of counsel that Malcolm would carry with him for the rest of his life:

> "Brother Malcolm, I want you to become well known. Because if you are well known, it will make me better known. But, Brother Malcolm, there is something you need to know. You will grow to be hated when you become well known. Because usually people get jealous of public figures. Nothing that Mr. Muhammad ever said to me was more prophetic." **86**

[86] Page 281 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## The Voice

**"**Anyone who has listened to me will have to agree that I believed in Elijah Muhammad and represented him one hundred percent. I never tried to take any credit for myself.**"**[87]

About a month before the March on Washington[88], the New York Times published a poll in college and university campuses that ranked Malcolm as the second most requested speaker in the country, behind only Senator Barry Goldwater. The interest had been building for some time — C. Eric Lincoln's book had become required reading in college courses across the nation, and a long interview Malcolm gave to some other magazine, which had enormous campus circulation, had put a personal voice behind the academic study. Students who had read both wanted to see the man for themselves.

By then Malcolm had spoken at more than fifty schools — Brown, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Rutgers, and dozens of others outside the Ivy League, along with historically Black institutions like Howard University and Atlanta University. He preferred college audiences to almost any other except all-Black ones. The sessions ran long, sometimes two to four hours past schedule, fueled by the sheer energy of the exchanges. Students and faculty fired questions and challenges at him, and Malcolm found those encounters sharpened his thinking in ways that few other settings could. Sometimes he would face a panel of six or eight department heads — sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, religion — each coming from a different perspective. And Malcolm always used a distinctive opening:

> **"**Gentlemen, I finished the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan. My high school was the Black ghetto of Roxbury, Massachusetts. My college was in the streets of Harlem, and my master's was taken in prison. Mr. Muhammad has taught me that I never need fear any man's intellect who tries to defend or to justify the white man's criminal record against the non-white man — especially the white man and the Black man here in North America.**"**[89]

Over time he developed a natural connection to his audience — a feel for the room that other public speakers had confirmed was the mark of anyone who had what Malcolm

[87] Page 261 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)
[88] https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/march-washington-jobs-and-freedom
[89] Page 299 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

called the "mass appeal gift." He could sense within minutes whether the audience was all Black or all white, even without looking; Black audiences carried a warmth, an almost musical quality in their responsiveness. He learned to read the different ways people challenged him, and the way certain Black professionals behaved differently depending on who else was in the room. Among all-Black audiences, Malcolm said, no one ever tried to defend the white man. But put those same people in a mixed setting and some of them would attack Malcolm, only to get the approval for the whites in the crowd.

His campus speeches ranged widely, but certain themes recurred — the decline of colonial empires, the drawing together of non-white peoples worldwide, and the failure of Western Christianity to practice what Christ had taught. The audience was often surprised to learn that Muslims honored Jesus as one of Islam's most important prophets, alongside Muhammad and Moses. Malcolm would note that even Billy Graham, pressed on the distinction, had once said publicly that he believed in Christ, not in Christianity.

Through it all, Mr. Muhammad continued to express his approval. He entrusted Malcolm with the Nation's affairs when he left the country to make an *Umra* to Mecca. Malcolm's devotion in return was absolute — he believed he would have thrown himself between Mr. Muhammad and an assassin without a second thought.

And then one day, standing at a window inside Harvard Law School, where he had been invited to speak, Malcolm glanced out and found himself staring directly at the building where his old burglary crew had once hidden out.

> **"**It rocked me like a tidal wave. Scenes from my once depraved life lashed through my mind. Living like an animal; thinking like an animal! Awareness came surging up in me—how deeply the religion of Islam had reached down into the mud to lift me up, to save me from being what I inevitably would have been: a dead criminal in a grave, or, if still alive, a flint-hard, bitter, thirty-seven-year-old convict in some penitentiary, or insane asylum. Or, at best, I would have been an old, fading Detroit Red, hustling, stealing enough for food and narcotics, and myself being stalked as prey by cruelly ambitious younger hustlers such as Detroit Red had been. But Allah had blessed me to learn about the religion of Islam, which had enabled me to lift myself up from the muck and the mire of this rotting world.**"**[90]

[90] Page 304 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Standing there, he thought of the Greek myth of Icarus — the boy whose father fashioned wings held together with wax and warned him never to fly too high. But the boy, thrilled by his own soaring, began to believe the flight was his own doing, and climbed higher and higher until the sun melted the wax and sent him falling.

Malcolm made a silent vow that moment: he would never forget that whatever wings he wore had been given to him by the religion of Islam. It was a vow, he would say later, that he never broke — not for one second.

# Part 5 | Malcolm X Shabazz

## Chapter 9

### Faithful

By 1961, Malcolm had given the Nation of Islam everything he had. From the single small mosque Mr. Muhammad had sent him to build in Harlem years earlier, he had grown three thriving congregations in New York alone—Mosque Seven-A in Manhattan, Seven-B in Corona, Queens, and Seven-C in Brooklyn—and had either founded or helped establish most of the Nation's hundred-plus mosques scattered across the country. He flew from city to city sometimes four times a week, catching whatever sleep he could on airplanes, keeping an overwhelming schedule of press conferences, radio appearances, television interviews, and public speeches that would have worn down anyone who carried less conviction in his bones.

And in every one of those appearances, without exception, he made sure the credit went where he believed it belonged. At least once in any public address, he would say the words "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches". When newspapers called him the "number two Black Muslim", he would telephone editors to correct them: all Muslims, he would explain, were number two—after Mr. Muhammad. He carried photographs of Mr. Muhammad in his briefcase and offered them to photographers who came to snap pictures of him instead, and he urged white journalists who sought interviews to travel to Chicago and hear the message directly from the Messenger himself.

The only recognition he sought was that the world to understand he was only a bridge for the teachings of Mr. Muhammad, nothing more. When people—white and Black, Muslim and non-Muslim alike—praised Malcolm for the Nation's growing influence, he would deflect every word of it. All praise, he told them, belonged to Allah, and anything creditable he had done was owed to Mr. Muhammad alone.

If Malcolm carried any private frustration, it was a single quiet one, and he kept it mostly to himself.

> **"**If I harbored any personal disappointment whatsoever, it was that privately I was convinced that our Nation of Islam could be an even greater force in the American Black man's overall struggle—if we engaged in more action. By that, I mean I thought privately that we should have amended, or relaxed, our general non-engagement policy.**"** [91]

Between Malcolm and his wife, Betty, this dedication created the only real argument he ever had with her. As their family grew—three daughters by now—Betty gently hinted that maybe he should save some money for them. Malcolm refused, and argued that too many organizations had been destroyed by leaders who tried to get rich off the cause. He was convinced that if anything happened to him, the Nation would look after Betty and the children for the rest of their lives. He had no doubt. However, he would later admit that he was a fool for believing that.

> **"**We nearly broke up over this argument. I finally convinced Betty that if anything ever happened to me, the Nation of Islam would take care of her for the rest of her life, and of our children until they were grown. I could never have been a bigger fool**"** [92]

## Envy

Within the organization, something else was shifting. As early as 1961, Malcolm had begun to hear remarks that slowly started to surface and reminded Malcolm of the disease that Mr. Muhammed warned him about, jealousy and envy. Certain officials in Chicago were saying that Malcolm was trying to take over the Nation, that he was grabbing credit for Mr. Muhammad's teachings, that he was building an empire for himself and enjoying his role as a "coast-to-coast big shot." The accusations stung, but Malcolm tried to let them pass; and Malcolm drew that memory now to remain steadfast, assuming that it wouldn't shake Mr. Muhammed's trust in Malcolm.

By 1962, Malcolm's name began disappearing from the pages of "Muhammad Speaks". Mr. Muhammad's son Herbert, who ran the paper, had quietly instructed his staff to write as little about Malcolm as possible. Rallies where Malcolm drew thousands—eight thousand students at the University of California, seven thousand people at a Harlem gathering—received no coverage in the Muslim press, even as European and African outlets reported on them prominently. At one point, Chicago headquarters actively

[91] Page 307 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[92] Page 309 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

discouraged Malcolm from holding large public events, but the following week he held another Harlem rally even bigger than the last, which only fueled the resentment.

What bothered Malcolm was not ignoring his work. He had already received more publicity than he had ever looked for. What hurt him was the realization that the Nation's own membership was being denied news of work done on their behalf, simply because Malcolm happened to be the one doing it.

It got to a point where Malcolm stopped dispatching his own hand-picked assistants from New York to open mosques elsewhere, because the phrase "Malcolm's ministers" had become a label in Chicago. When Life magazine approached him for a personal feature, he turned them down. When Newsweek offered a cover story, he declined. When an invitation came to appear on Meet the Press—one of the most widely watched programs in America—he said no to that, too. Each refusal was a loss for the Nation and for the broader cause, and Malcolm knew it.

### The Dark Side

As far back as 1955, Malcolm heard whispered hints about something he simply would never ever give it any thought. The idea that Mr. Muhammad—the man who had pulled him out of the living death of prison, who embodied moral reform for every Muslim in the Nation, who personally expelled members for adultery and punished his own officials more severely than the newest convert—that this man could be guilty of the same transgressions he condemned was so unthinkable that Malcolm's mind shut the door on it entirely.

Over the years, several women who served as Mr. Muhammad's personal secretaries turned up pregnant. Each one was hauled into an internal tribunal, accused of immorality, and sentenced to years of total isolation—cut off from all contact with other Muslims. They accepted their punishments, and no one asked the obvious question.

Malcolm refused to ask either. He remembered what happened to his own brother Reginald, who had been sentenced to isolation years earlier for having doubts about Mr. Muhammad. When Reginald walked into the Mosque Seven restaurant one day, Malcolm met him at the door, looked into his brother's eyes, and told him he was not welcome. Reginald turned and left, and the two never saw each other again. Malcolm had done that

because he considered himself a Muslim before he was anyone's brother. The thought of doubting Mr. Muhammad felt like inviting the same kind of spiritual destruction.

By late 1962, Muslims were leaving the Chicago Mosque in increasing numbers. The rumors were spreading among non-Muslim communities, too, and Malcolm was certain that at any moment some journalist would turn to him and ask the question directly, and he would have nothing to say.

> "My faith had been shaken in a way that I can never fully describe. For I had discovered Muslims had been betrayed by Elijah Muhammad himself." [93]

Finally, Malcolm went to see Wallace Muhammad, Mr. Muhammad's second-youngest son and the family member Malcolm considered the most spiritually reflective. Wallace already knew why Malcolm had come. He confirmed what Malcolm feared, and when Malcolm proposed that the two of them find a way to support his father through the crisis, Wallace responded quietly that he did not think his father would welcome the effort.

Then Malcolm broke the Nation's rules. He sought out three of the former secretaries—women who had been cast into isolation and cut off from everyone they knew—and heard their stories directly. And from them he learned something that wounded him even more deeply.

> "Mr. Muhammad had told them that Malcolm was the best, the greatest minister he ever had—but that one day Malcolm would turn against him. He was "dangerous". I learned from these former secretaries of Mr. Muhammad that while he was praising me to my face, he was tearing me apart behind my back. That deeply hurt me." [94]

### Betrayal

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Within hours, every Muslim minister in the country received a clear instruction from Mr. Muhammad: make no comment whatsoever about the assassination. If pressured by reporters, they were to say two words and nothing more "no comment".

Mr. Muhammad had been scheduled to speak at the Manhattan Center in New York that week, but he cancelled his appearance. Because the rental fee could not be recovered,

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[93] Page 312 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[94] Page 315 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

he asked Malcolm to speak in his place. Malcolm took the stage and delivered a speech titled "God's Judgment of White America", drawn from notes he prepared at least a week before the assassination, built around a theme he highlighted many times: that the hatred America had allowed to flourish would eventually turn back upon itself.

When the question-and-answer session opened, someone asked the question that was on everyone's mind "Malcolm, What do you think about the President's death?

Malcolm answered with what he honestly felt—that the violence America had permitted and exported, from the killing of Medgar Evers to the death of Patrice Lumumba, had been allowed to spread until it struck down the country's own leader. It was, he said, a case of "the chickens coming home to roost".

Malcolm's name was all over the headlines the next day. But his biggest problem yet was the Nation's reaction, and what he was about to discover would only make it worse. The next monthly visit to Mr. Muhammad, which happened to be the next day as well, didn't have the usual warmth. They sat in Mr. Muhammad's living room, talked of other things for a while, and then Mr. Muhammad asked whether Malcolm had seen the morning papers.

Malcolm said he had, Mr. Muhammad told him that his comment had been badly timed, the whole country was grieving, and that a statement like that could cause problems for Muslims everywhere. Then came the words that changed everything:

> **"**I'll have to silence you for the next ninety days—so that the Muslims everywhere can be disassociated from the blunder.**"** [95]

Malcolm did not argue. He had spent years teaching his own assistants that anyone in a position to discipline others must be capable of accepting discipline himself. He told Mr. Muhammad:

> **"**Sir, I agree with you, and I submit, one hundred per cent.**"** [96]

He flew back to New York prepared to pass the news to his assistants at Mosque Seven—only to discover they had already been told. A telegram had gone out to every newspaper, radio station, and television outlet in the city. Phones rang from London, from Paris, from every major wire service and network. He told them all the same thing: he had

[95] Page 320 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[96] Page 320 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

disobeyed Mr. Muhammad, he accepted the discipline completely, and he expected to be speaking again after ninety days.

More details were revealed later on, it wasn't just about public speaking. He was forbidden not only from speaking to the press but from teaching at his own Mosque Seven. An announcement circulated through the Nation that Malcolm would be reinstated within ninety days "if he submits"—phrasing carefully designed to suggest rebellion, though Malcolm had submitted unconditionally. Three days later, word came that one of his own former assistants was telling members of Mosque Seven that if they knew what Malcolm had really done, they would kill him themselves.

"Any Muslim would have known that my "chickens coming home to roost" statement had been only an excuse to put into action the plan for getting me out. And step one had been already taken: the Muslims were given the impression that I had rebelled against Mr. Muhammad. I could now anticipate step two: I would remain "suspended" (and later I would be "isolated") indefinitely. Step three would be either to provoke some Muslim ignorant of the truth to take it upon himself to kill me as a "religious duty"—or to "isolate" me so that I would gradually disappear from the public scene.

The only person who knew was my wife. I never would have dreamed that I would ever depend so much upon any woman for strength as I now leaned upon Betty. There was no exchange between us; Betty said nothing, being the caliber of wife that she is, with the depth of understanding that she has—but I could feel the envelopment of her comfort. I knew that she was as faithful a servant of Allah as I was, and I knew that whatever happened, she was with me. The death talk was not my fear. Every second of my twelve years with Mr. Muhammad, I had been ready to lay down my life for him. The thing to me worse than death was the betrayal." [97]

[97] Page 324 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## Miami

March 1964 – Miami [98]

**"**My head felt like it was bleeding inside. I felt like my brain was damaged. I went to see Dr. Leona A. Turner, who has been my family doctor for years, who practices in East Elmhurst, Long Island. I asked her to give me a brain examination. She did examine me. She said I was under great strain—and I needed rest.**"** [99]

Cassius Clay "Muhammed Ali" was in Miami, training for his heavyweight title fight against Sonny Liston, and he invited Malcolm, Betty, and the children to come down as his guests—a sixth wedding anniversary present.

Malcolm had first met Cassius in Detroit in 1962, when the young fighter and his brother Rudolph had walked into the Students' Luncheonette next door to the mosque where Mr. Muhammad was about to address a large rally. Cassius had pumped Malcolm's hand and announced himself with all the confidence the world would later come to know—"I'm Cassius Clay"—and acted as if Malcolm was supposed to recognize the name.

[98] gettyimages.com.au, black-muslim-leader-malcolm-x-teasingly-leaning-on-shoulder-news-photo
[99] Page 322 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Malcolm had not heard of him at the time, but he liked him, and Cassius would be one of the very few people Malcolm ever invited into his home.

Now in Florida, this was Betty's first real vacation since they got married, and the three girls played around the heavyweight contender while Malcolm tried to hold himself together. He walked and talked, but only a small corner of his mind was handling whatever came out of his mouth. The rest was filled with a procession of scenes from the previous twelve years—the mosques, the rallies, the man he believed in.

> **"**I was in a state of emotional shock. I was like someone who for twelve years had had an inseparable, beautiful marriage—and then suddenly one morning at breakfast the marriage partner had thrust across the table some divorce papers. I felt as though something in nature had failed, like the sun, or the stars. It was that incredible a phenomenon to me—something too stupendous to conceive.**"** [100]

He told reporters at the training camp the statement announced by the Nation referring to Malcolm "that he would be reinstated in ninety days" was a lie. Although it was clear to Malcolm at this point that the separation between himself and the Nation of Islam was permanent, he was not yet ready to accept it.

At night, Malcolm took Seat Number Seven—seven being the number that had followed him through his life—and watched as the bout unfolded almost exactly as Cassius had planned. Liston, who had trained for a quick knockout, became tired after the first few rounds. Aside from a chemical irritant that temporarily blinded Cassius in the middle rounds, the younger fighter controlled the fight from start to finish, and by the end, Liston could not continue. The greatest upset in recent boxing history belonged to a twenty-two-year-old Muslim from Louisville who had spent months pretending he was a fool.

The celebration that night was the quietest anyone could remember for a new heavyweight champion. Cassius came to Malcolm's motel, ate ice cream, talked with friends including the football star Jim Brown, took a short nap on Malcolm's bed, and went home.

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[100] Page 323 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## The Plot

A former close assistant from Mosque Seven—a man with a working knowledge of explosives—had been given an order: wire Malcolm's car to explode the moment he turns on the ignition key. But this brother saw too many years of Malcolm's total dedication to carry out the command. Instead, he came to Malcolm and told him everything.

Malcolm thanked the man for his life and told him the truth about what was happening within the organization. The brother was shaken and took it upon himself to reach out to others in the Mosque Seven circle who might be called on next, making sure they didn't believe the lies about Malcolm.

> "This first direct death-order was how, finally, I began to arrive at my psychological divorce from the Nation of Islam." [101]

Slowly, with so much pain, after twelve years of thinking only of the Nation and never of himself, Malcolm began assessing what he had and what he could do on his own. He had an authentic and valuable international reputation, followers among non-Muslims in Harlem and across New York, built over years of street rallies and public actions. He understood how to communicate to a television audience and to a crowd on a Harlem sidewalk, and—crucially— to the people in the ghetto whom other leaders only talked about, because he had been one of them. He knew their language, their rhythms, their problems. He had the ghetto's trust, and he understood that this kind of trust was given only to someone who had shown, through years, that he would never sell them out.

And he saw, with absolute clarity, that the Black community in America was sitting on enormous untapped political power. Twenty-two million people, he reasoned, could form a voting force that would reshape the country's politics overnight. Every other group in America—farmers, doctors, labor unions, oil companies—had organized around its own interests and built lobbying operations to make those interests heard. The Black community, divided into Democrats and Republicans and liberals and conservatives, had never done the same. Malcolm believed that if it ever did, no politician in the country could afford to ignore it.

A vision for a new organization was forming in his mind—one that would welcome Black Americans of every faith and carry into practice what the Nation of Islam had only preached.

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[101] Page 328 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## New Lens

Malcolm finally woke up and began to think about the future. The organization he envisioned would be different from the Nation of Islam in one fundamental way: it would welcome Black people of all faiths. It would be built for action, not just preaching. It would carry into practice what the Nation had only talked about. He felt a challenge rising in him—to build something that could help cure what he called the sickness that kept Black America under the white man's heel, in all aspects of life. Culturally, they had accepted someone else's heritage as their own and been taught for centuries to endure suffering in return for rewards in the afterlife. Economically, they spent billions of dollars but owned almost nothing. And politically, they let themselves be divided into competing parties instead of moving together as one powerful force.

> "Twenty-two million Black men! They have given America four hundred years of toil; they have bled and died in every battle since the Revolution; they were in America before the Pilgrims, and long before the mass immigrations—and they are still today at the bottom of everything!" [102]

The response was beyond Malcolm's expectation. Many brothers and sisters from Mosque Seven who had been among his closest allies announced their break from the Nation to stand with him. Support arrived from people he had not expected: doctors, professionals, middle-class Black Americans who had been drawn to the Nation's message but repelled by its restrictions. Telegrams and letters poured into the Hotel Theresa in Harlem from across the country, many of them enclosing contributions before Malcolm had even announced a platform. Twenty-two speaking invitations arrived in a single Monday morning's mail, a surprising number of them from groups of white Christian ministers.

White people wrote and called asking if they could join. The answer was no—the membership would be all Black—but Malcolm suggested they could support the work financially.

He rented the Carver Ballroom at the Hotel Theresa, at the corner of 125th Street and Seventh Avenue—one of Harlem's most recognized crossroads—and called a press conference. The microphones were set, and reporters from outlets that reached around the world opened their notebooks.

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[102] Page 334 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

> **"**I am going to organize and head a new mosque in New York City known as the Muslim Mosque, Inc. This will give us a religious base, and the spiritual force necessary to rid our people of the vices that destroy the moral fiber of our community.
>
> Muslim Mosque, Inc. will have its temporary headquarters in the Hotel Theresa in Harlem. It will be the working base for an action program designed to eliminate the political oppression, the economic exploitation, and the social degradation suffered daily by twenty-two million Afro-Americans.**"** [103]

During such a difficult period in his life, and trying hard to beat the clock, Malcolm knew there was one more thing he needed to do, something that had been in his mind for a long time. It would require money that he did not have.

> **"**I took a plane to Boston. I was turning again to my sister Ella. Though at times I'd made Ella angry at me, beneath it all, since I had first come to her as a teen-aged hick from Michigan, Ella had never once really wavered from my corner. "Ella," I said, "I want to make the pilgrimage to Mecca." Ella said, "How much do you need?**"** [104]

[103] Page 336 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[104] Page 336 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Chapter 10

## Signs

**"**Allah always gives you signs, when you are with Him, that He is with you.**"**[105]

Long before Malcolm left the Nation of Islam, a question kept coming back to him after almost every campus lecture. A small group of visitors would approach him — men and women from the Middle East, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula — who identified themselves as Muslims. They had heard his speeches, including his indictments of white America, and they believed he was sincere in calling himself a Muslim, but they also believed that if he were ever exposed to what they called "true Islam", he would understand it differently. The implication that his Islam was somehow fabricated felt like a big challenge.

Yet in his own mind, he kept returning to a simple question: if someone truly believed in a faith, what reason could there possibly be to avoid learning more about it?

He raised the idea once with Wallace Muhammad, Mr. Muhammad's son, whose judgment Malcolm had always respected. Wallace's answer was positive, a Muslim ought to pursue the deepest possible understanding of his own faith.

Those same Muslims urged Malcolm for some time to meet a man named Dr. Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi, educated at the University of Cairo and earned his doctorate in London, and he had built a wide-ranging career as an Islamic scholar, an advisor to the United Nations, and a prolific author. He ran the Federation of Islamic Associations in the United States and Canada from a brownstone at 1 Riverside Drive in Manhattan. Malcolm drove past the building more than once. Then one day a newspaperman introduced them.

They spoke for fifteen or twenty minutes, but just before they parted, Dr. Shawarbi reminded Malcolm: "No man has believed perfectly until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

And then there was Ella. Malcolm's older half-sister — the tall, forceful, Georgia-born woman who had first brought him north to Boston as a teenager — had been expelled from the Nation's Mosque Eleven in Boston when she discovered and embraced true Islam. She began studying with mainstream Muslims in Boston and went so far as to open her own school dedicated to teaching Arabic. She didn't know the language herself, but she invited instructors who did. That was Ella. She had been setting aside money from

[105] Page 338 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

her real estate work to make the Hajj, and when Malcolm told her he wanted to go, she said it was more important for him to go first. She didn't hesitate to give him the money.

Malcolm thought about Ella the whole flight. She played one of the most significant roles in his life. No other woman had ever been strong enough to point him in a direction. He introduced her into Islam years earlier, and now she was sending him to its holiest city.

When Malcolm applied for a visa at the Saudi Arabian Consulate, he learned that no Muslim converted in America could receive Hajj approval without the signed endorsement from Dr. Mahmoud Shawarbi. He phoned Shawarbi to ask, and the older man was astonished — he had been about to call Malcolm himself.

"By all means come right over," he said.

At Shawarbi's office, the doctor handed Malcolm the signed letter approving his pilgrimage and then gave him a book: The Eternal Message of Muhammad, by Abd-Al-Rahman Azzam. Azzam himself had just sent it, and it was intended for Malcolm. Shawarbi described the author as a man born in Egypt who held Saudi citizenship, a well-known figure in international diplomacy, and one of Prince Faisal's closest counselors. He had been following Malcolm's story in the American press. Shawarbi also gave Malcolm two telephone numbers — one for his own son Muhammad, who was studying in Cairo, and one for Azzam's son Omar, who lived in Jedda. "Call them both, by all means," he said.

Malcolm left New York quietly. Only Betty and his three daughters, along with a few close associates, came to Kennedy International Airport. He wanted no last-minute obstacles from the State Department or anyone else. On the Lufthansa jet, his two seatmates turned out to be Muslims — one bound for Cairo, the other for Jeddah. All the way to Frankfurt, Malcolm was either reading Azzam's book or talking with them.

During a layover in Frankfurt, Malcolm and his Cairo-bound companion explored the city. In the shops and streets of the city, Malcolm noticed something that would stay with him: the Germans greeted strangers with genuine warmth and said goodbye just as warmly, even when nothing was bought. When his companion explained that they were Muslims, Malcolm saw something he had already glimpsed at home — that people who perceived you as a Muslim perceived you as a human being, and everything about the interaction changed.

## Cairo

Cairo airport was already packed with pilgrims from across the world, embracing one another in an atmosphere that struck Malcolm as soon as he stepped off the plane. There were warmth and kindness everywhere, among people of every complexion, and the effect on him was immediate and enormous.

> "The feeling hit me that there really wasn't any color problem here. The effect was as though I had just stepped out of a prison."[106]

He spent two days as a tourist, impressed by modern schools, housing developments, highways, and industrialization. He was particularly surprised to learn that automobiles and buses were being manufactured in Egypt. He visited Dr. Shawarbi's nineteen-year-old son Muhammad, who was enrolled at Cairo University to study economics and political science. The younger Shawarbi told Malcolm that his father's great dream was to build an Islamic university on American soil.

An Egyptian scientist and his wife, also headed for the Hajj, took Malcolm to dinner in Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo. They were well-informed people, and the conversation turned to American food surpluses and global hunger. The scientist's wife asked why people elsewhere were starving when America had so much extra food. Malcolm told her about government warehouses and subsidized storage facilities where surplus food was kept by armies of caretakers until it spoiled and then disposed of to make room for the next batch. She looked at him as though she thought he must be exaggerating. He did not mention that there were hungry people inside the United States, too.

When Malcolm called the Muslim friend from his Lufthansa flight, a Hajj gathering of seven people were waiting to welcome him. A judge and an official from the Ministry of Education were there, and they spoke English well. They welcomed Malcolm as if he was an old friend, and he considered it another sign — that wherever he turned on this journey, someone appeared to help him.

At Cairo airport, the Hajj groups began entering the state of Ihram — the physical and spiritual preparation needed before Hajj. They removed their regular clothing and put on two white towels: the Izar, folded around the waist, and the Rida, draped over the neck and shoulders so that the right arm remained bare. Simple sandals left the anklebones exposed. A money belt went over the waist wrapper, and a shoulder bag held the passport and papers — including, in Malcolm's case, the letter from Dr. Shawarbi.

Thousands of pilgrims filled the terminal, all dressed identically. There was no way to distinguish the rich from the poor. From all directions, the chant rose and fell: "Labbayk!

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[106] Page 340 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Labbayk!" — "Here I come, O Lord!" — as planes departed for Jedda every few minutes. Already in the air, Malcolm learned that strings had been pulled to get him aboard; someone else was removed from the flight so that an American Muslim would not be disappointed. He felt both regret and humility at the inconvenience to someone he didn't even know.

On the plane, the word spread that a Muslim from America was on board. Faces turned toward him, smiling. The captain, an Egyptian whose complexion was darker than Malcolm's, came back to meet him and invited him up to the cockpit. Malcolm had flown on more planes than almost any Black person in America, and he had never once been invited into a cockpit. Now, standing between two Muslim pilots bound for the holy land, he looked through the glass at the sky ahead and felt that something deep in his heart had changed.

### Jeddah

The Jedda airport was even more crowded than Cairo's airport — every race, every language, every color represented in a single shuffling mass. Malcolm's group joined the long line toward customs, where each Hajj group was assigned a Mutawaf, the guide responsible for getting pilgrims from Jeddah to Mecca. Across the terminal, the chanting continued in waves — "Labbayk!" and prayers of submission affirming the Oneness of God.

At the customs desk, the clerk took one look at Malcolm's American passport and stopped. Rapid Arabic erupted between the clerk and Malcolm's companions, who gestured and argued on his behalf. The judge in the group handed over the letter from Dr. Shawarbi. The clerk read it, but he wasn't happy. Finally, the judge turned to Malcolm and confirmed that he would have to appear before the Muslim high court that examined the credentials of all converts seeking entry to Mecca. No non-Muslim could pass, and the court would have to be satisfied that Malcolm's conversion was genuine.

His companions had to move on without him. They seemed unhappy, but Malcolm told them not to worry: "Allah guides me".

It was about three in the morning, a Friday — the Muslim day of communal prayer, courts were closed. He would have to wait at least until Saturday. His passport was held at customs. In his towels and sandals, he followed a young Mutawaf's aide to a massive dormitory building right beside the airport.

"We reached the dormitory and began climbing, up to the fourth, top, tier, passing members of every race on earth. Chinese, Indonesians, Afghans. Many, not yet changed into the Ihram garb, still wore their national dress. It was like pages out of the National Geographic magazine."[107]

Then the guide who oversaw Malcolm came and demonstrated how to perform the "Salah", the obligatory act of prayer practiced five times a day. Malcolm, a Muslim minister who led congregations for over a decade, did not know the postures. He tried to follow along, but his ankles, accustomed to chairs and Western sitting, would not easily. When his guide left, promising to return in a few hours, Malcolm kept practicing, watched by the other pilgrims.

As dawn broke and the compartment came to life, he began to see how central the prayer rug was to everyday Muslim culture. Each person had a small one, and families shared larger ones. First, it served as a prayer mat; then someone spread a cloth over it and it became a dining table; after the meal it was a sitting room; at night, a bed. Everything in the portable life of a pilgrim revolved around this single piece of woven fabric.

Malcolm explored the complex around the airport, found a small restaurant in the courtyard, and bought roasted chicken that he ate with his hands. Old men sat cross-legged on the ground, eating with their hands with the same ease and satisfaction they might have shown in a fine restaurant.

After sunset prayer, Malcolm was lying on his bed on the fourth tier, feeling as alone and helpless as he had felt since he was a small child.

Then an idea clicked. Earlier that day, while wandering the courtyard, he noticed four officials sitting at a table with a telephone. Dr. Shawarbi gave him a number back in New York — the number for Omar Azzam, the son of the man who wrote the book. Omar Azzam lived right there in Jeddah.

Within minutes, Malcolm was downstairs, showing the letter from Shawarbi to the officials. One who spoke some English read it to others. "A Muslim from America!" then he dialed the number.

Omar Azzam came straight to the airport. He was young, tall, in good shape, and well-mannered — a man who in America would have been called *white*. But from the way he approached and greeted Malcolm, there was no feeling of racial difference whatsoever. "Why didn't you call before?" he asked. In less than half an hour, Azzam had Malcolm released, retrieved his passport and suitcase from customs, and took him to his car.

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[107] Page 345 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

> **"**In something less than half an hour, he had gotten me released, my suitcase and passport had been retrieved from Customs, and we were in Dr. Azzam's car, driving through the city of Jedda, with me dressed in the Ihram two towels and sandals. I was speechless at the man's attitude, and at my own physical feeling of no difference between us as human beings. I had heard for years of Muslim hospitality, but one couldn't quite imagine such warmth.**"**[108]

Omar Azzam, Malcolm learned, was a Swiss-trained engineer whose specialty was city planning. He had been on loan from the United Nations to the Saudi government, overseeing the reconstruction of the holy sites, and his sister was married to Prince Faisal's son. "My father will be so happy to meet you," Azzam told him. His father was the author of the book — the man who asked Shawarbi to place it in Malcolm's hands.

At Azzam's home, despite the early hour, several people were awake and waiting — the elder Azzam, his brother, a chemist, and a friend. Each of them embraced Malcolm as though he was one of them. These were men who had never laid eyes on him before, and they treated him as family. Tea and coffee were served. The elder Azzam, known as Azzam Pasha before President Nasser abolished noble titles, dominated the conversation. Why hadn't Malcolm called sooner? They were embarrassed that he got stuck all that time at the airport.

Then Azzam Pasha made a phone call, and when the arrangements were complete, Malcolm found himself standing in suite 214 of the Jeddah Palace Hotel — a three-room suite with a bathroom as large as a double at the New York Hilton and a porch overlooking the ancient Red Sea city. This man — born in Egypt, a Saudi citizen, a diplomat who moved among kings and served as one of Prince Faisal's most trusted counselors — vacated his own house so that Malcolm, a stranger carrying nothing but a letter from a mutual friend, could rest in comfort.

Malcolm sat, thanked God, and felt a deep gratitude — he had never imagined being welcomed with such generosity and hospitality.

> **"**There had never before been in my emotions such an impulse to pray— and I did, prostrating myself on the living-room rug.**"**[109]

His instincts, sharpened by decades of living in America, searched for a hidden motive, but there was none. This man had everything, and he knew from the American press that Malcolm was labeled a racist, a criminal, and an agitator who used Islam as a cover for his activities. Malcolm had no organization of any substance, no money, no job. He had borrowed the plane fare from Ella. By any calculation, Azzam Pasha had more to lose than

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[108] Page 350 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[109] Page 352 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

to gain by associating with him. And yet he had given up his house without a second thought.

That morning in the Jeddah Palace was when Malcolm first began to re-examine the definition of "white man". That notion, Malcolm came to realize, described attitudes and actions far more than it described complexion. In America, it meant a specific set of behaviors toward Black people and all other non-white people. But in the Muslim world, men with white skin had shown him more genuine brotherhood than he had ever experienced anywhere else in his life.

He sat down looking through the window, at the sea and the streets filled with pilgrims, and he wrote in his notebook:

> "My excitement, sitting here, waiting to go before the Hajj Committee, is indescribable. My window faces to the sea westward. The streets are filled with the incoming pilgrims from all over the world. The prayers are to Allah and verses from the Quran are on the lips of everyone. Never have I seen such a beautiful sight, nor witnessed such a scene, nor felt such an atmosphere. Although I am excited, I feel safe and secure, thousands of miles from the totally different life that I have known. Imagine that twenty-four hours ago, I was in the fourth-floor room over the airport, surrounded by people with whom I could not communicate, feeling uncertain about the future, and very lonely, and then one phone call, following Dr. Shawarbi's instructions. I have met one of the most powerful men in the Muslim world. I will soon sleep in his bed at the Jeddah Palace. I know that I am surrounded by friends whose sincerity and religious zeal I can feel. I must pray again to thank Allah for this blessing, and I must pray again that my wife and children back in America will always be blessed for their sacrifices, too."[110]

That evening, young Dr. Azzam picked him up for dinner at the family home. In the hotel lobby, Malcolm had glimpsed his neighbor across the hall — the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, surrounded by attendants, with a small caravan of cars waiting outside as people pressed forward to greet him. Malcolm would later have the chance to speak with the Grand Mufti for about half an hour and found him a dignified man who was remarkably well informed on international affairs and on the latest events in America.

[110] — (p. 353)

At dinner, the elder Azzam spoke at length about the racial lineage of the Prophet Muhammad's descendants, showing how they were both Black and white. Color-based divisions within the Muslim world, Azzam explained, existed only to the extent that a given region had been shaped by Western influence. Wherever one found prejudice rooted in skin color, it reflected the degree to which Western attitudes had taken hold.

## Hajj 1964

The next morning, Malcolm appeared before the Hajj Committee Court. The judge, Sheikh Muhammad Harkon, asked him few questions about Islam, and Malcolm answered as truthfully as he could. Sheikh Harkon not only recognized him as a true Muslim but gave him two books — one in English, one in Arabic — and recorded his name in the Holy Register. "I hope you will become a great preacher of Islam in America," the judge told him.

That evening, Muhammad Abdul Azziz Maged, the Deputy Chief of Protocol for Prince Faisal, phoned and delivered good news: a special car would be waiting after dinner to take him to Mecca. The deputy told him to eat well, as Hajj rituals would demand physical strength.

Two young Arabs accompanied Malcolm. Guards were present at different points along the road took one look at the car, the driver made a sign, and they were waved through without even slowing down. When they entered Mecca, the city seemed as old as time itself — winding streets lined with shops, choked with buses, cars, trucks, and tens of thousands of pilgrims from every part of the earth.

At the Great Mosque, Malcolm performed the ablution (Wudu) and entered. Pilgrims filled every available space, lying, sitting, sleeping, praying, and walking. The new mosque being constructed around the Kaaba was one of the massive rebuilding projects under Omar Azzam's direction, and when completed, it would rival the architectural beauty of India's Taj Mahal.

Then Malcolm saw the Kaaba — the great cube-shaped Black stone house at the center of the Grand Mosque, being circled by thousands upon thousands of praying pilgrims, men and women, of every size, shape, color, and race on earth. He knew the prayer a pilgrim was meant to say when his eyes first fell on the Kaaba: "O God, You are peace, and peace derives from You. So greet us, O Lord, with peace." He could not get close enough to touch the stone. He raised his hand and cried out "Takbir!" — "God is the greatest!"

His Mutawaf, a short, dark-skinned Arab named Muhammad who spoke no English, led him through the pressing crowd seven times around the Kaaba. Malcolm saw pilgrims who were really old, others being carried, too weak to walk, all of them immersed in the

ritual of Hajj. On the seventh round he prayed, then they drank water from the ancient well of Zamzam and ran between the two hills of Safa and Marwa, where Hagar had once wandered the same ground searching for water for her son Ismail.

The next day, thousands of pilgrims set out after sunrise toward Mount Arafat, crying in unison "Labbayk!" and "Allah Akbar!" through some of the most desolate mountains Malcolm had ever seen — bare, rough rock without a trace of vegetation. They arrived around noon and prayed and chanted until sunset, performing the afternoon and sunset prayers. Then they raised their hands and repeated together: "There is no God but Allah. He has no partner. Good emanates from Him, and He has power over all things."

Standing on Mount Arafat completed the essentials of Hajj. No pilgrim who missed it could call himself a pilgrim. The Ihram had ended. They cast the traditional seven stones at the devil.

Malcolm was going through one of the most emotional and spiritual experiences of his life, and New York felt a million miles away. Yet he had no idea that back in America, the press was painting a terrible image of him, linking his name to a Harlem rifle club, or that the Nation of Islam had filed a lawsuit to force his family out of their home.

## The Letter

About twenty Muslims who had completed the Hajj were gathered in a large tent on Mount Arafat. As an American, Malcolm was the center of attention. Someone who spoke English asked what about the pilgrimage had impressed him most.

> **"**The brotherhood! The people of all races, colors, from all over the world coming together as one! It has proved to me the power of the One God.**"**[111]

He spoke about racism in America as well — its depth, its persistence, and its psychological toll. The listeners, who had known that conditions for Black people in America were difficult, but never fully understood the level and depth of the struggle. As Muslims, they were sensitive to injustice, and Malcolm could sense the impact of his words on them.

He reflected afterward that the letter he finally sat down to write had been forming in his mind for days — maybe longer. Each day in the Muslim world, the color-blindness of its religious life and its human society had been making a deeper impression, pushing steadily against the conclusions he had carried with him for twelve years.

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[111] Page 357 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He wrote first to Betty, then to Ella, who had made all of it possible. He wrote to Dr. Shawarbi, whose trust had opened the door. He wrote to Wallace Muhammad. And he wrote to his assistants at the newly formed Muslim Mosque, Inc. in Harlem, with a note asking that the letter be copied and given to the press.

He knew that when the letter became public, it would surprise everyone — family, friends, enemies, and the millions who knew nothing of him except the image formed during his years with the Nation of Islam. But his whole life had been a chronology of changes, and this was the next one.

> "Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.
>
> I have been blessed to visit the Holy City of Mecca. I have made my seven circuits around the Ka'ba, led by a young Mutawaf named Muhammad. I drank water from the well of Zem Zem. I ran seven times back and forth between the hills of Mt. Al-Safa and Al-Marwah. I have prayed in the ancient city of Mina, and I have prayed on Mt. Arafat.
>
> There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to Black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white.
>
> America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white' — but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.

You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to re-arrange much of my thought-patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions. This was not too difficult for me. Despite my firm convictions, I have been always a man who tries to face facts, and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility that must go hand in hand with every form of intelligent search for truth.

During the past eleven days here in the Muslim world, I have eaten from the same plate, drunk from the same glass, and slept in the same bed (or on the same rug) — while praying to the same God — with fellow Muslims, whose eyes were the bluest of blue, whose hair was the blondest of blond, and whose skin was the whitest of white. And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the Black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan, and Ghana.

"We were truly all the same (brothers) — because their belief in one God had removed the 'white' from their minds, the 'white' from their behavior, and the 'white' from their attitude.

I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man — and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their 'differences' in color.

With racism plaguing America like an incurable cancer, the so-called 'Christian' white American heart should be more receptive to a proven solution to such a destructive problem. Perhaps it could be in time to save America from imminent disaster — the same destruction brought upon Germany by racism that eventually destroyed the Germans themselves.

Each hour here in the Holy Land enables me to have greater spiritual insights into what is happening in America between Black and white. The American Negro never can be blamed for his racial animosities — he is only reacting to four hundred years of the conscious racism of the American whites. But as racism leads America up the suicide path, I do believe, from the experiences that

I have had with them, that the whites of the younger generation, in the colleges and universities, will see the handwriting on the wall and many of them will turn to the spiritual path of truth – the only way left to America to ward off the disaster that racism inevitably must lead to.

Never have I been so highly honored. Never have I been made to feel more humble and unworthy. Who would believe the blessings that have been heaped upon an American Negro? A few nights ago, a man who would be called in America a 'white' man, a United Nations diplomat, an ambassador, a companion of kings, gave me his hotel suite, his bed. By this man, His Excellency Prince Faisal, who rules this Holy Land, was made aware of my presence here in Jedda. The very next morning, Prince Faisal's son, in person, informed me that by the will and decree of his esteemed father, I was to be a State Guest.

The Deputy Chief of Protocol himself took me before the Hajj Court. His Holiness Sheikh Muhammad Harkon himself okayed my visit to Mecca. His Holiness gave me two books on Islam, with his personal seal and autograph, and he told me that he prayed that I would be a successful preacher of Islam in America. A car, a driver, and a guide, have been placed at my disposal, making it possible for me to travel about this Holy Land almost at will. The government provides air-conditioned quarters and servants in each city that I visit. Never would I have even thought of dreaming that I would ever be a recipient of such honors – honors that in America would be bestowed upon a King – not a Negro.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds.

Sincerely,

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

(Malcolm X)"[112]

[112] Page 361 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Chapter 11

Malcolm X sits with Prince (later King) Faisal al-Saud – April 1964 [113]

## King Faisal

**"**Prince (later King) Faisal, the absolute ruler of Arabia, had made me a guest of the State. Among the courtesies and privileges which this brought to me, especially—shamelessly—I relished the chauffeured car which toured me around in Mecca with the chauffeur-guide pointing out sights of particular significance."[114]

Malcolm went all around Mecca. It didn't take long before the place touched him and made him see how well the place and the surrounding atmosphere were all connected deeply to history.

"The Muslim from America", a newspaper put a photograph of him beside Cassius Clay at the United Nations, and the picture made him very popular. Everyone in the village asked about Cassius, the fight wan played on cinema screens, which made the local people even more excited about meeting Malcolm.

Before he knew it, Malcolm had adapted with the local customs and the people around him. He ate from a shared dish, drank from the same cup and slept in the open at Muzdalifa on a mat beside a row of strangers.

[113] gettyimages.com.au, american-civil-rights-leader-malcolm-x-sits-and-meets-with-news-photo

[114] Page 362 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He met Hussein Amini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, blue-eyed and blond-haired and better read on America than most Americans. He met Sheikh Abdullah Eraif, the mayor of Mecca, who as a journalist had once criticized the city's government and had then been handed it to run, and succeeded to do so. He met Kasem Gulek from the Turkish Parliament, telling him that six hundred buses came from Turkey alone. Fifty thousand pilgrims, from one country.

Gulek asked him why he had broken with Mr. Muhammad. He said he preferred not to spread the details in front of foreigners. There was too much at stake in the Black man's unity for him to tear at it now.

A historic moment for Malcolm yet to come, he had the opportunity to meet Prince (later King) Faisal in person.

"As I entered the room, tall, handsome Prince Faisal came from behind his desk. I never will forget the reflection I had at that instant, that here was one of the world's most important men, and yet with his dignity one saw clearly his sincere humility. He indicated for me a chair opposite from his. Our interpreter was the Deputy Chief of Protocol, Muhammad Abdul Azziz Maged, an Egyptian-born Arab, who looked like a Harlem Negro.

Prince Faisal impatiently gestured when I began stumbling for words trying to express my gratitude for the great honor he had paid me in making me a guest of the State. It was only Muslim hospitality to another Muslim, he explained, and I was an unusual Muslim from America.

He asked me to understand above all that whatever he had done had been his pleasure, with no other motives whatever A gliding servant served a choice of two kinds of tea as Prince Faisal talked. His son, Muhammad Faisal, had "met" me on American television while attending a Northern California university. Prince Faisal had read Egyptian writers' articles about the American "Black Muslims." "If what these writers say is true, the Black Muslims have the wrong Islam," he said.

I explained my role of the previous twelve years, of helping to organize and to build the Nation of Islam. I said that my purpose for making the Hajj was to get an understanding of true Islam. "That is good," Prince Faisal said, pointing out that there was an abundance of English-translation literature about Islam—so that there was no excuse for ignorance, and no reason for sincere people to allow themselves to be misled."[115]

[115] Page 367 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

## Omowale

He flew out of the Holy Land, end of April, to Beirut, carrying with him the memories of Mecca. He arrived tired at the Palm Beach Hotel, very tired, that night it was the best sleep he had since leaving America. He spent only a few days, gave a talk at the American University, then flew to Cairo and took a train to Alexandria to see the sea. From there, he headed to Nigeria, the land of his roots.

Malcolm spent part of the trip up in the cockpit with The pilot -an athlete and a swimmer who took part in the 1960 Olympics- listening to what a Nigerian pilot flying between African capitals thought about the continent. Back in his seat he sat beside an African who spoke about politics and independence with enthusiasm. When people had been kept in a stagnant place for a hundred years, the man told him, the last thing to give them was an election. Elections belonged to countries that reached a good level of political maturity. What Africa needed now, he said, were leaders willing to lift the mind of the whole nation up to the level where it could vote well.

In Lagos, Nigeria's largest city, Professor Essien-Udom was waiting at the airport. They had met once before, in the United States, when Essien-Udom spent months researching the movement for his book on Black nationalism. That evening his house was filled with people who wanted to meet Malcolm — doctors, other professors, professional men and their wives, all of them curious about the American movement they had been reading about for a decade.

The next morning, he was driven to the University of Ibadan and led into Trenchard Hall. The hall was full. He spoke about his concerns and vision — stressed that free African nations needed to see the case of the American Black man as their own cause, and to help bring that case before the United Nations. It was time, he told them, for the twenty-two million Afro-Americans in the United States to see themselves as part of the Pan-African world.

Physically, he said, we stay in America. We fight in America for the rights our own Constitution promises us. But spiritually, we're still connected to Africa, the homeland of our ancestors.

The young Africans in that hall asked him questions sharper than any American college audience had ever asked him, Malcolm recalled. He heard, from eighteen-year-olds, a level of political seriousness he rarely heard from American adults. And then an old West

Indian in the audience stood up and started attacking him. The students in the hall booed the old man, and when he tried to hold his ground a small group went after him, he barely escaped. Malcolm found out later that the old man was married to a white woman and was trying to secure a job at an American-run agency in the city, and that the agency pushed him to challenge Malcolm.

When the lecture ended, the Nigerian Muslim Students' Society arranged a gathering with Malcolm and raised questions about faith, America, and thoughts in relation to the future young Muslims of Africa.

**"**Afterward, in the Students' Union, I was plied with questions, and I was made an honorary member of the Nigerian Muslim Students' Society. Right here in my wallet is my card: "Alhadji Malcolm X. Registration No. M-138." With the membership, I was given a new name: "Omowale." It means, in the Yoruba language, "the son who has come home." I meant it when I told them I had never received a more treasured honor.**"**[116]

Before he left Nigeria there was one more conversation. It was a long, private talk with a group of Nigerian officials about the way the U.S. Information Agency had been quietly moving through Africa, spreading the impression that Black Americans were making steady progress and that the whole race problem back home was about to solve itself. One senior official told him that the informed men in African government were not fooled — and they were aware of the American government's steady effort to keep the peoples of African descent divided in all forms.

### The Land of Gold

The next stop was Accra, the capital of Ghana. It was the first sub-Saharan African nation to break free from the colonial rule back in 1957, only seven years before the visit of Malcolm.

Malcolm's first experience at the airport was strange. A red-faced American in a wilted linen suit came up out of the crowd, welcomed him with passion, shook his hands and told him that he was from Alabama, and invited Malcolm to come to his house for dinner. Malcolm stared for a moment, gave a short answer, and moved on. Here he was, at last, in the land of Africans, and yet the first man to meet him was a white American.

[116] Page 370 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Only the next morning at the hotel's dining room, Malcolm connected the dots. The tables around him were full of American businessmen, talking openly about Africa's untapped minerals, the wealth of resources, while African waiters moved between the tables refilling their coffee cups as if they were invisible. Malcolm sat with his plate and did not touch it. He was thinking of Alabama police dogs, the churches bombed in Birmingham, and how in this same country where those men's grandfathers had once come to load human beings onto ships, their grandsons came back now to load ore.

By the time he finished his coffee, the day started to get busy. The writer Julian Mayfield was the informal center of the small colony of Afro-American exiles in Ghana, and when Malcolm phoned him, it seemed like no time at all before he was sitting in Mayfield's living room surrounded by about forty Black Americans who had decided, at some point in their lives, that they could no longer be Americans. There were dentists, lawyers, professors and writers. Dr. and Mrs. Robert E. Lee, the militant dentists out of Brooklyn who had given up their citizenship. Alice Windom. Maya Angelou. Victoria Garvin. Leslie Lacy. Some of them, before Malcolm even landed, had already formed what they were calling the "Malcolm X Committee" and prepared a full schedule for his trip.

They handed him the press clippings that appeared in the Ghanaian papers when word first got out that he was coming. In the eyes of the Ghanaian press, Malcolm was an African hero. One paper called him the first Afro-American leader to make an independent trip to Africa since Du Bois[117] had come to Ghana — as if his arrival was the mark of a new chapter in the Black struggle. He had come from a country where his name was, in most of the papers, attached to a negative image, while here in Ghana his name was being printed alongside Du Bois's.

He addressed the largest audience of the whole tour in the Great Hall of the University of Ghana — mostly Africans, but with a good number of American whites too. He told the room never in his life seen so many white people so nice to so many Blacks as those white people were being to the Africans here in Africa. In America, he said, Afro-Americans were struggling for integration. These white people ought to come there, to Africa, and see how they themselves grinned at Africans. You've really got integration here, he told them. But can you tell these Africans that back home you smile at Black people the same

[117] W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was a landmark American sociologist, historian, civil rights leader, and Pan-Africanist

way? No, you can't. And you don't honestly like these Africans any better either. What you like is what Africa has under its soil.

The white faces in the audience went red. He softened his voice a little and told them that he was not anti-American and didn't come here to condemn America. He came to tell the truth. And if the truth condemned America, he said, then America stood condemned. He could feel some of the American whites in the hall agree with him.

An invitation came next to speak at the Ghanaian Parliament. He gave a brief talk, then asked the legislators if they could condemn Portugal and South Africa while Black people in America were being bitten by dogs and beaten with clubs? He said he was certain the only reason Black Africans had said so little about the American situation was that American propaganda agencies had been very effective at hiding the truth.

The people of Ghana never stopped surprising Malcolm, the president and the leader of Ghana Dr. Nkrumah was next on the list.

> "As I entered Dr. Nkrumah's long office, he came out from behind his desk at the far end. Dr. Nkrumah wore ordinary dress, his hand was extended and a smile was on his sensitive face. I pumped his hand. We sat on a couch and talked. I knew that he was particularly well-informed on the Afro-American's plight, as for years he had lived and studied in America. We discussed the unity of Africans and peoples of African descent. We agreed that Pan-Africanism was the key also to the problems of those of African heritage. I could feel the warm, likeable and very down-to-earth qualities of Dr. Nkrumah. My time with him was up all too soon."[118]

The next day Malcolm had lunch with the Nigerian High Commissioner to Ghana, His Excellency Alhadji Isa Wali — a short, warm man who spent two years in Washington and knew exactly what discrimination in America looked like. After lunch he held up before the room a copy of an American magazine called Horizon, opened to an article by a Princeton professor about the Nation of Islam. On one page was a photograph of Malcolm. On the front page was a color illustration of a Nigerian Muslim king from centuries earlier —tall, and dignified in his robes. His Excellency looked at the two pages and then around the room, and he said that when he looked at those two pictures, he saw one man in two different sets of clothes. One was born in America, and one was born in Africa. That, he said, was the only difference between them.

[118] Page 376 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Then he presented Malcolm with a robe like the one in the illustration — deep blue, with an orange turban to go with it. His Excellency also placed in his hands a two-volume translation of the Qur'an. Malcolm never cried in public, but there had been more than one moment on this trip when he had come close to tears.

The "Malcolm X Committee", next morning, went with him to the airport. As they were finishing their farewells, a small motorcade pulled up, and five ambassadors — five of them, in official cars — came to see him one last time.

**"**In the plane, bound for Monrovia, Liberia, to spend a day, I knew that after what I had experienced in the Holy Land, the second most indelible memory I would carry back to America would be the Africa seething with serious awareness of itself, and of Africa's wealth, and of her power, and of her destined role in the world.**"**[119]

## New York 1964

At John F. Kennedy airport, Malcolm saw a big crowd on the way out — fifty reporters and photographers, maybe more. 'I honestly wondered what celebrity I had been on the plane with,' Malcolm recalled. But soon he realized this was home, with Malcolm once again at the center of the press.

**"**In Harlem especially, and also in some other U.S. cities, the 1964 long, hot summer's predicted explosions had begun. Article after article in the white man's press had cast me as a symbol—if not a causative agent—of the "revolt" and of the "violence" of the American Black man, wherever it had sprung up.**"**[120]

Reporters gathered around Malcolm and started bombarding him with questions, especially about the "Blood Brothers" incident, and the claim they were affiliated with him.

He had been answering questions like these for years, and he left America for six weeks and came back to find the exact same approach. When white teenagers killed somebody in New York, he told them, that was a sociological problem. When Black teenagers killed somebody, the same papers went looking for a scapegoat. When white men owned rifles, the papers called it the Second Amendment. When Black men owned rifles, the same papers called it ominous.

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[119] Page 379 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

[120] Page 380 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

He told them the American Black man had to stop believing the story the American white man had been telling him about himself: that his only tool was to beg for civil rights. The American Black man, he said, had a strong case to bring before the United Nations, on the charge of the denial of human rights. If the case of Angola could be heard, and the case of South Africa could be heard, then the case of Harlem could be heard. Once it was heard, the United States was going to find it had no easy way to shrug it off. He was proposing, in front of thirty microphones, a route out of the argument the reporters had been running on him for years — a route that took the argument out of American courtrooms and into a bigger stage.

## Black and White

The next question was about his letter from Mecca.

> "I hope that once and for all my Hajj to the Holy City of Mecca has established our Muslim Mosque's authentic religious affiliation with the 750 million Muslims of the orthodox Islamic World. And I know once and for all that the Black Africans look upon America's 22 million Blacks as long-lost brothers! They love us! They study our struggle for freedom! They were so happy to hear how we are awakening from our long sleep— after so-called 'Christian' white America had taught us to be ashamed of our African brothers and homeland!"[121]

Was it true, they wanted to know, that he had written home saying he now accepted white men as brothers? Was it true he had changed his mind?

> "Yes, I have been convinced that some American whites do want to help cure the rampant racism which is on the path to destroying this country! It was in the Holy World that my attitude was changed, by what I experienced there, and by what I witnessed there, in terms of brotherhood— not just brotherhood toward me, but brotherhood between all men, of all nationalities and complexions, who were there. And now that I am back in America, my attitude here concerning white people has to be governed by what my Black brothers and I experience here, and what we witness here— in terms of brotherhood. The problem here in America is that we meet such a small minority of individual so-called 'good,' or 'brotherly' white people. Here in the

[121] Page 381 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

United States, notwithstanding those few 'good' white people, it is the collective 150 million white people whom the collective 22 million Black people have to deal with!"[122]

The reporters were, he could tell, glad when the press conference ended. He knew the machine well enough to know that in the morning some of the papers would print the softer half of what he had said — the part about not condemning all white people — and would quietly leave out the part about the United Nations, and the part about a hundred million people of African blood. That was to be expected. He had been reading American papers about himself for a long time now.

That night the telephone in his apartment did not stop ringing. His brothers and sisters around New York were calling to congratulate him on what they had heard on the radio and seen on the television news. Old voices called. Some he had not heard in months. Some white voices called too — ministers and professors and hosts asking if he would come speak from their pulpit, their college, their studio.

The next afternoon he was driving along the freeway when a car with a white man on the passenger side, the side closer to Malcolm. The man rolled his window down and said

Malcolm X! and he stuck his hand out.
"Do you mind shaking hands with a white man?"
Just as the light turned green. Malcolm looked at him and said
"I don't mind shaking hands with human beings. Are you one?"[123]

[122] Page 382 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)
[123] Page 383 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

# Chapter 12

## Awakening

Malcolm was more mature now. He was no longer just a minister of the Nation of Islam — he became a national figure, and that raised two questions. The first was that most African Americans had little interest in taking their struggle to the United Nations, no matter how many times he argued that their fight was international. The second was that they would not rush toward the mainstream *Sunni* Islam that had so profoundly changed him during the pilgrimage -*The Hajj*-. The American system had thoroughly convinced Black people to see themselves as facing a local 'civil rights' problem, and Malcolm realized it would be a long journey before his people saw it as a global one.

Malcolm began building a new platform to reach more people. Every Sunday afternoon or evening, he opened the Audubon Ballroom doors — a well-known Harlem venue — for everyone. He spoke with a very broad language, addressing himself to Black people of every faith, and political party, because the struggle he was describing was bigger than any single group.

> **"**—not Muslim, nor Christian, Catholic, nor Protestant…Baptist nor Methodist, Democrat nor Republican, Mason nor Elk! I mean the Black people of America — and the Black people all over this earth! Because it is as this collective mass of Black people that we have been deprived not only of our civil rights, but even of our human rights, the right to human dignity…." [124]

Afterward, on the streets, Malcolm could read the faces of the people who came up to shake his hand or ask for an autograph. He recognized the hesitation — the wait-and-see look — and he understood exactly where it came from. Over the last century since the end of the Civil War, the Black man in America had followed one leader after another down roads that went nowhere. The promise of Christianity had not delivered. Political leaders had not delivered. The Black man was cautious, scarred, and had every reason to hold back from yet another voice telling him he found the solution.

Malcolm never stopped reflecting about his visit to Mecca, what happened to him was unlike anything in his thirty-nine years of living. For the first time in his life, standing before the Creator in the Holy City, he felt like a dignified human being — not defined by

[124] Page 384 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

his race, not controlled by his anger, not carrying a banner for someone else's cause, but simply existing among other people from all walks of life, equal before God.

The serenity of that place relieved his heart. Staying up at night among brother pilgrims, his mind drifted to memories he thought he had lost forever — all the way back to when he was a small boy of eight or nine, out behind the family house in Lansing, Michigan, where there was an old grassy rise the neighborhood children called Hector's Hill. He found himself rewinding the twelve years he had spent with Mr. Muhammad, and his absolute dedication during those years. He had believed in Mr. Muhammad not simply as a leader in the ordinary sense but as a divinely guided one — someone incapable of error, beyond faults. Sitting on a hilltop in the Holy World, he came to see clearly how dangerous that kind of belief was, how reckless it was to hold any human being in such esteem that you consider them above question. No person, no matter how charismatic or visionary, should be granted that kind of power over another's mind.

It was an eye-opening experience in Mecca as Malcolm recalled. His view on racial matters matured and his thinking deepened. In the long letters he wrote to friends back home, he tried to put into words how he had been transformed — not just his view of the racial problem in America, but his entire understanding of what it meant to seek truth and justice as a human being:

> **"**I've had enough of someone else's propaganda. I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.**"** [125]

The American press had little interest in conveying Malcolm's transformation. The summer of 1964 was one of the most volatile in recent memory — cities burning, protests erupting, the long hot season producing one crisis after another — and the media had already cast Malcolm in a role it did not intend to rewrite. Every time he sat down in front of a camera or picked up a telephone from a reporter, the question circled back to the same word: violence.

He was accused of stirring up Black people, of inciting riots. The press called him "the angriest Negro in America," and he would not deny the charge — he spoke exactly as he felt, and he believed there was a time for anger. What infuriated him was the framing, the

[125] Page 386 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

implication that he was somehow creating the rage that poured through American cities when in fact the conditions producing that rage had existed for generations.

> **"**It takes no one to stir up the sociological dynamite that stems from unemployment, bad housing, and inferior education already in the ghettoes. This explosively criminal condition has existed for so long, it needs no fuse; it fuses itself; it spontaneously combusts from within itself.…**"** [126]

What Malcolm advocated was not aggression but self-defense — the right of any human being to protect himself when the law refused to do it. If white people were attacked and the authorities did not intervene, Malcolm argued, those white people should have every right to defend themselves with arms. But the headlines never put it that way. They cried about armed violence, took his words out of context, and left the public with panic and confusion. In speech after speech during this period, he tried to draw a line the reporters kept erasing:

> **"**I don't speak against the sincere, well-meaning, good white people. I have learned that there are some. I have learned that not all white people are racists. I am speaking against and my fight is against the white racists. I firmly believe that Negroes have the right to fight against these racists, by any means that are necessary.**"** [127]

He was equally unsparing about the failures of organized Christianity in addressing racism. The church had sowed racial hatred for centuries, he argued, and was now facing the consequences. He pointed to the bitter irony of congregations in 1965 America guarded by deacons who barred Black worshippers at the door, and to St. Augustine, Florida — a city named for the Black African saint who helped save Catholicism from heresy — which had recently been the scene of violent racial clashes. The greatest single failure of the Christian church, in Malcolm's view, was its inability to confront racism. And he pressed the question further: did white America have the capacity to repent, to compensate for centuries of brutality? Most Black people, he believed, would be willing to forgive. But a desegregated restaurant, a theater, a public restroom — the whole range of what passed for "integration" — none of that touched the underlying disease.

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[126] *Page 389 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)*

[127] *Page 387 (e-book), Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)*

## The Fox and The Wolf

While Malcolm was abroad during the fall of 1964, the American press tracked him down in Cairo and again in Accra, asking the question, Johnson or Goldwater?

His response was always the same. Both candidates, as far as the Black man was concerned, amounted to the same thing — one was the liberal fox and the other the conservative wolf, and both would eat you. He preferred the wolf, in a way, because at least the wolf's growling kept you on your feet and fighting. The fox, with its tricks and promises, could have you half-digested before you even understood what was happening. He pointed out that the first candidate Lyndon Johnson called for after the assassination in Dallas was his close friend Senator Richard Russell of Georgia — a man who had led the congressional opposition to every major civil rights measure. Johnson declared publicly that civil rights were a moral issue, Malcolm noted, while his closest ally was one of the South's most committed opponents of racial equality. The contradiction, for Malcolm, needed no commentary.

But the 1964 election didn't carry much weight in Malcolm's mind during his second trip overseas. This time he was gone for eighteen weeks, traveling through the Middle East and across the African continent, and the scope of his meetings had expanded enormously since his first journey abroad. He sat down privately with presidents and religious leaders of every background — African, Arab, Asian, Muslim, and non-Muslim.

One conversation stayed with. In an African country he chose not to name publicly, Malcolm spent an entire afternoon talking with an American white ambassador who was, by all accounts, the most respected American diplomat on the continent. The ambassador told Malcolm something that surprised him: in all his years living in Africa, the ambassador had never thought about people in terms of race. He was far more aware of language differences than skin color. It was only when he went back to America that he found himself conscious of color.

Malcolm then came to realize:

> "What you are telling me is that it isn't the American white man who is a racist, but it's the American political, economic, and social atmosphere that automatically nourishes a racist psychology in the white man." [128]

The ambassador agreed. They both agreed that the American society made it nearly impossible for people to meet without being conscious of color differences, and if that racism embedded in the culture could somehow be removed, America had the potential to become a place where people of every background could live together as genuine human beings. The conversation gave Malcolm a way of articulating something he had been reaching for since Mecca: the white man was not inherently evil. It was the American system — its politics, its economy, its social atmosphere — that shaped him.

Throughout his travels, Malcolm was under constant surveillance. Government agents trailed him from hotel to hotel and meeting to meeting, and one particularly conspicuous operative finally irritated him enough that Malcolm walked over to the man's breakfast table one morning and confronted him directly. He told the agent he knew he was being followed and said the only thing any intelligence agency could ever find him guilty of was keeping an open mind.

### Unity

Back in Harlem, Malcolm was completely immersed in building the organization he believed Black Americans needed. The Organization of Afro-American Unity — the OAAU — was all-Black by design, but its goal was paradoxical: a society in which honest brotherhood between the races could exist. The very name echoed the Organization of African Unity, and the vision behind it was Pan-African in scope, linking the struggle of Black Americans to the liberation movements Malcolm had seen across the continent.

His biggest challenge was that his old public image — the so-called "Black Muslim" constructed over the years by the media — kept following him. He was trying to reshape that image, to step into a new kind of leadership that the country was not yet ready to accept. He was no less angry than he had been before Mecca; the conditions that made him angry had not changed one bit. But the experience of genuine brotherhood he had

[128] Page 391 Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

seen in Mecca had opened his eyes to something he could now see, and he admitted that anger, no matter how righteous, could blind a person's vision.

The roots of his belief in Black Nationalism ran deep. He had been exposed to Marcus Garvey's teachings through his father as a child — teachings that had, in fact, led to his father's murder. Even during his years as a devoted follower of Mr. Muhammad, Malcolm had understood that Black Nationalist philosophy, with its emphasis on racial dignity, economic self-reliance, and collective confidence, gave Black people something that no other movement had: the conviction that they could stand up, shed their scars, and take responsibility for themselves.

Now, every free moment he had, he walked through Harlem talking with the people he knew and making speeches about what true Islam had taught him — that it takes every ingredient, every background, every kind of person to make the human family complete:

> "Since I learned the truth in Mecca, my dearest friends have come to include all kinds — some Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, and even atheists! I have friends who are called Capitalists, Socialists, and Communists! Some of my friends are moderates, conservatives, extremists — some are even Uncle Toms! My friends today are Black, brown, red, yellow, and white!" [129]

The question that followed him everywhere now, especially from white members of his audiences, was simple and direct: "What can a sincere white person do?"

The answer Malcolm gave in 1965 was different from the one he used to give, and the shift troubled him. He thought often about the young white college student who flew down from New England to find him at the Nation of Islam's restaurant in Harlem, years earlier, and had asked him that very question. He told her there was nothing she could do. He always felt remorseful for the way he answered.

The answer was this: sincere white people could not join the OAAU. Malcolm believed strongly that when whites joined Black organizations, even with the best of intentions, the dynamic shifted — the Black members began leaning on the white members, deferring to them, and the organization lost something essential. But that did not mean there was nothing white people could do. On the contrary, Malcolm urged them to organize among themselves, to form all-white groups dedicated to fighting racism in their own neighborhoods, their own workplaces, their own communities. Because that was where

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American racism lived — not among its Black victims, but in white communities, where it was spoken quietly, practiced casually, and passed from one generation to the next without challenge.

Working separately, he said, the sincere whites and the sincere Black people would be working together — toward the same goal, from opposite sides, each doing the work that only they could do. And in that mutual sincerity, he believed they might be able to show a road to the salvation of America itself.

### Remember Me

Everything Malcolm did until now was treated as urgent. He lived each day, he said, as if he was already dead. Wherever he went — making speeches, holding meetings, organizing for the OAAU — he was aware that people were watching, waiting for their moment. He had said publicly, many times, that he knew they had their orders, and that anyone who doubted him simply did not understand how the Nation of Islam worked. But he also had followers who were deeply loyal, as dedicated to him, he believed, as he himself had once been to Mr. Muhammad.

> **"**Those who would hunt a man need to remember that a jungle also contains those who hunt the hunters.**"** [130]

He had given so much time to the book — the autobiography composed with Alex Haley — because he believed that if he honestly told the full truth of his life, it might carry some value beyond his own story. He hoped that an open-minded reader would see how the society he was born into, as a Black young man in America, made his path to prison almost inevitable.

He dared to dream, sometimes, history might remember the voice that disturbed the white man's comfort — and judge that it helped save America from something worse. He did not say this with certainty though. The goal, he recognized, had always been the same as Dr. Martin Luther King's, even though their approaches were different. King's nonviolent marches exposed the evil of racist violence against defenseless Black people. Malcolm's confrontational speeches exposed it from a different angle.

[130] Page 401 Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)

Riots had torn through American cities during the long, hot summer of 1964, and Malcolm was certain that 1965 would bring more and worse. The cause of those uprisings had not been touched by any civil rights bill or any presidential speech. The weeds had simply been left to grow.

He loved learning, and he wished to pursue a formal education. He wished he could have been a lawyer. He loved languages, and it annoyed him to stand among Africans who looked like him and not understand a word of the Hausa or Swahili being spoken all around him. He began studying Arabic, which he believed would become the most powerful spiritual language of the future, and he wanted to learn Chinese, which he thought would become its most powerful political language.

He believed it would be hard to find a Black man anywhere in America who had lived further down, who had been more ignorant, who suffered more deeply. But he came to believe in something that no one could take from him: it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest joy can arrive, and only after slavery and prison that the sweetest understanding of freedom can come. For his twenty-two million Black brothers and sisters, he believed he had fought the best way he knew how, and done the best he could, knowing that his shortcomings were many.

## Malcolm's Legacy

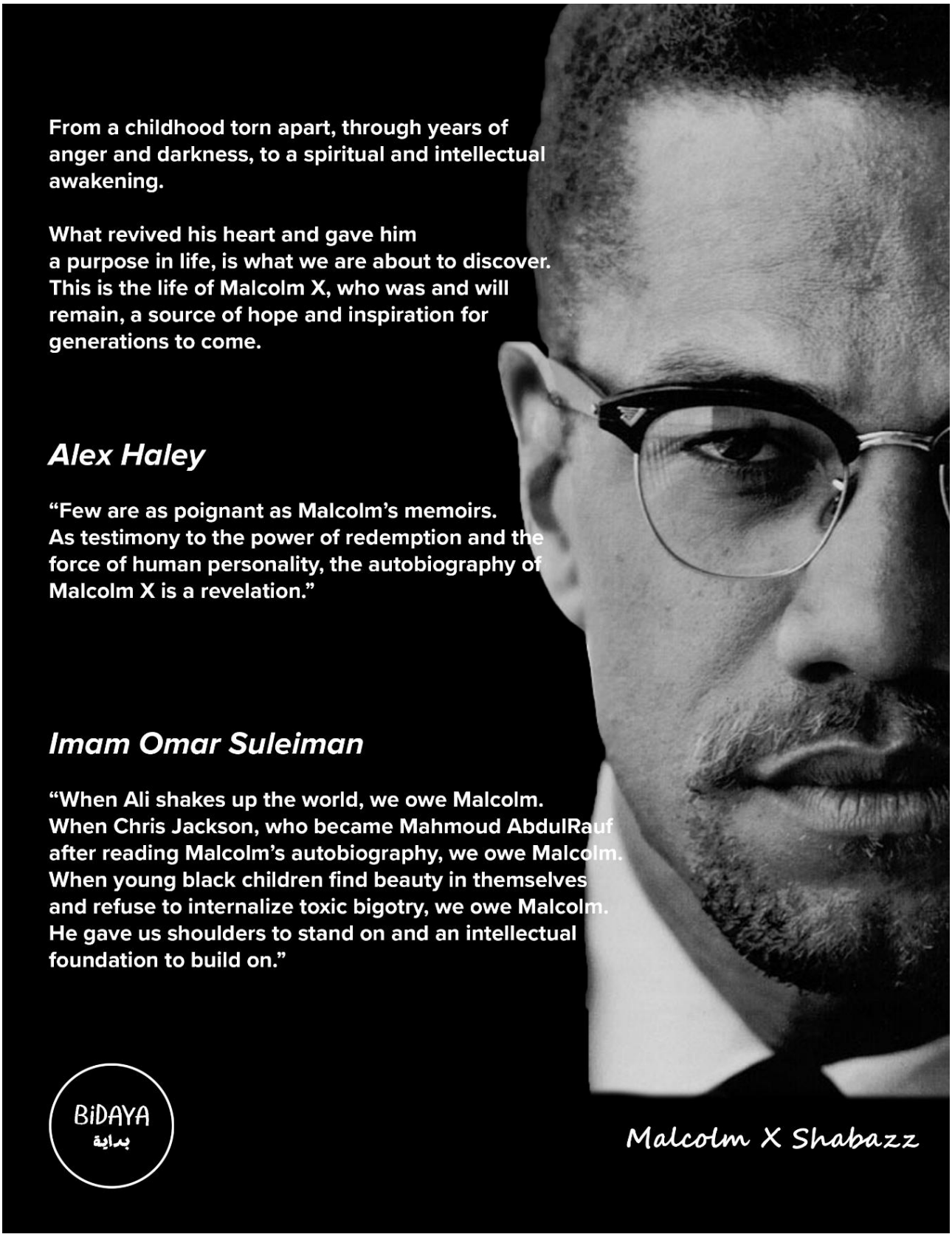
The conflict with the Nation had been intensifying throughout 1964, with repeated death threats — until Feb 21, 1965, when Malcolm took the stage at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan. He was gunned down by three men while his wife, Betty Shabazz — pregnant with twins — and their four daughters watched from the front row. He was thirty-nine years old.

> "Yes, I have cherished my 'demagogue' role. I know that societies often have killed the people who have helped to change those societies. And if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in the body of America – then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the mistakes have been mine." [131]

Malcolm's legacy grew even larger after his death. The perception of Malcolm shifted dramatically over the years — from the divisive figure the American media had labeled, to a respected national icon. Hundreds of institutions and organizations took on his name and claimed his legacy.

More than sixty years after his death, the story of Malcolm still matters.

[131] Page 402 Alex Haley, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: One World, 1992)


From a childhood torn apart, through years of anger and darkness, to a spiritual and intellectual awakening.
What revived his heart and gave him a purpose in life, is what we are about to discover. This is the life of Malcolm X, who was and will remain, a source of hope and inspiration for generations to come.
Alex Haley
“Few are as poignant as Malcolm’s memoirs. As testimony to the power of redemption and the force of human personality, the autobiography of Malcolm X is a revelation.”
Imam Omar Suleiman
“When Ali shakes up the world, we owe Malcolm. When Chris Jackson, who became Mahmoud AbdulRauf after reading Malcolm’s autobiography, we owe Malcolm. When young black children find beauty in themselves and refuse to internalize toxic bigotry, we owe Malcolm. He gave us shoulders to stand on and an intellectual foundation to build on.”
BiDAYA
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Malcolm X Shabazz